

**TIDES OF EMPIRE: MERIT, MORALITY, AND DEVELOPMENT IN
RURAL CAMBODIA**

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Courtney Work

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Courtney Work, Ph. D.

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Abstract

Set in Sambok Dung, a small rural village in Western Cambodia, this ethnographic study attends to the physical and social landscapes over which empire rolls and to the detritus that remains through its ebbs and flows. This is an intimate picture of social life at the edge of the forest and the frontier of empire; it is also a critique leveled from the margins of a marginal state that attempts to re-member the social categories of religion and politics and of nature and culture. I attend to the interstitial zones of these externally constructed categories and excavate the discursive, historical, and practical boundaries they attempt to describe: boundaries rendered null, I argue, by practices of subsistence and community that extend beyond the human actors and persist within and through the imperial classifications.

Cambodia's return to the market economy after thirty years of war is remarkable for the intensity of both its economic success and its authoritarian brutality. When the country opened to the global market in the late 1990s, the government awarded large-scale Economic Land Concessions (ELCs) to development companies. Violent dispossessions and equally violent protests marked this adventure in primitive accumulation, and Social Land Concessions (SLCs) were issued as a

palliative for Cambodian citizens. One of these SLCs brought landless and land-poor farmers to cut the village of Sambok Dung out of the forest in the middle of the country's largest ELC.

Sambok Dung is a contact zone where multiple ways of being in the world are simultaneously at play. The dissertation attends to the intimate dwelling of heterogeneous villagers, and to the structural forces of states, development projects, and universal religions, but also allows the mountains, the forest, and the spirits of the land into the stories as agentive actors. The mountains and weather world expose the fragility of development projects and the low wages of plantation work renders null their legitimacy. The temples and roads are expensive in excess of capacity, yet the people in Sambok Dung desire these hallmarks of empire and point their productive energies toward them, dragging the forests and spirits into the rising tide.

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Courtney Work received her MA in Anthropology and Women's and Gender Studies from Brandeis University in 2007 and her BA cum laude in English Literature from the University of Minnesota, Twin Cities in 1996.

Work first learned about Cambodian ways of being in the world at a small Buddhist temple in Southern Minnesota. She originally went to the monks to learn meditation and mindfulness techniques. While there, she witnessed the transformation of Buddhist space as the small Cambodian community finished construction of a *kutī* (monk's dwelling) on their newly purchased ten acres of land. Her subsequent studies in Anthropology progressed and deepened her relationships with the Minnesota community of Cambodian Buddhists.

The strings that bind these relationships extend into her anthropological inquiries at the edge of the forest in rural Cambodia. Work has traveled to Cambodia seven times since 2005, establishing a Community College service learning program and doing field research that informed her MA thesis and her PhD dissertation. Her work in Cambodia continues with forthcoming publications on the issues of land tenure, deforestation, and climate mitigation strategies.

This dissertation is dedicated to the memory of my father

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PREFACE

Why in this place?

Sambok Dung is a place of becoming.¹ The forest is becoming village, the houses of worship are becoming concrete, and strangers are becoming neighbors. It was this becoming that made it stand out for me as the right site for my dissertation research. My original intent was to study the reconstruction of religion amid the construction of community in this socially heterogeneous environment against the backdrop of Khmer Rouge (KR) displacements and civil war. When I got to the village, my first two encounters were with the village spirit and with local stories of the dangers of woodcutting since the plantations moved into the neighborhood.

I continued to study religion and spirit traditions, which have caused me to rethink the categories of both ‘animism’ and ‘religion’, but the concerns of villagers caused me to expand my field of inquiry. This expansion brought the power of Buddhism and the spirits into direct conversation with the power of global development and the even stronger power of the physical environment at the edge of the forest. The becoming was also an undoing and the dance of creation and destruction was always visible.

Sambok Dung came into being as a result of a social land concession (SLC) that brought villagers from all over the country to cut rice fields from the forest. The advent of the SLC is part of Cambodia’s becoming. Thirty years of war that started in 1970 with the ouster of Sihanouk finally ended with the death of Pol Pot and the absorption of KR factions into government ministry and military positions in 1999.

¹ This is a fictional name for the village.

Since that time, Cambodia has entered the global marketplace and become a player in the high-stakes game of resource extraction and global agrarian transformation that is currently sweeping over the remaining forests of Southeast Asia. The primary vehicle for this transformation is the economic land concession (ELC), without which the SLC would have never been issued.

My story is not about the final enclosure of land in Cambodia and the sudden wealth it engenders, but this sets the stage for the story that emerged from my eighteen cumulative month of research in Sambok Dung between 2010 and 2012. My story is *within* this enclosure. I want to take a moment here, at the outset, to explain the land deals, the plantations, and forest exploitation that hum in the background of my dissertation.

The 315,000 hectare economic land concession (ELC) that straddles Kompong Chhnang and Pursat Provinces is part of the largest and most controversial Cambodian concession. Awarded to the Pheapimex Fuchan Cambodia Co Ltd in 2000, the concession is Cambodian owned, but the plantation operations of the Pheapimex group are externally based in China, Korea, and Taiwan.² Sambok Dung sits in the

² For more on this particular concession and the intricacies of economic expansion through concessions in Cambodia, see A. Neef and S. Touch, "Land Grabbing in Cambodia: Narratives, Mechanisms and Impacts" (Cornell University, 2012); Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries (MAFF), Royal Government of Cambodia, *Overview on Economic Land Concession in Cambodia*, 2010; NGO Forum on Cambodia, *Statistical Analysis on Land Dispute Occurring in Cambodia 2009* (Phnom Penh: Land Information Center Land and Livelihoods Program, 2010); Global Witness, *Country for Sale: how Cambodia's Elite has Captured the Country's Extractive Industries* (London: Global Witness, 2009); Mark Grimsditch and N. Henderson, *Untitled: Tenure Insecurity and Inequality in the Cambodian Land Sector* (Phnom Penh: Bridges Across Borders Southeast Asia, 2009); Kathleen O'Keefe, *Land is Life: Land Conflict Interventions in Cambodia. A Review of Case Studies and NGO Perceptions* (Phnom Penh: NGO Forum on Cambodia, 2009); Shalmali Guttal, "Alienation of Land and Resources in Cambodia," *Land Struggles. LRAN Briefing Paper Series* (2007), 9-18; Alice Beban and Courtney Work, "The Spirits are Crying: Dispossession Land and Possessing Bodies in Rural Cambodia," *Antipode* 46, no. 3 (2014), 1-18. For broader regional discussions of the issue, see Neef and Touch, *Land Grabbing in Cambodia: Narratives, Mechanisms and Impacts*; Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry

middle of that ELC and although there were no official land titles issued by the government, every person I spoke to who had cleared their land and were using it as either homestead or rice field believed they held title to their land.

Cambodia's land laws have undergone substantial transformations since the first codifications of territory in the colonial era, and understanding contemporary claims to legal tenure require careful scrutiny. Property legislation in the Land Law of 2001 overturned the 1993 laws that honored usufruct claims to land ownership, wherein one could claim land if they demonstrated habitation and development of the property for at least five consecutive years.³ The ELC sub-decree issued in 2005 provides a mechanism to grant state private land to a domestic or foreign concessionaire on long-term (e.g. 99 year) lease, while also introducing SLCs under pressure from international donors. These were proposed to redistribute land to the poor, but are arguably too limited to create real change, with 1614 SLCs totaling 6.2ha allocated thus far, compared with almost 1.5 million ha in ELCs.⁴

and Fisheries (MAFF), Royal Government of Cambodia, *Overview on Economic Land Concession in Cambodia*; NGO Forum on Cambodia, *Statistical Analysis on Land Dispute Occurring in Cambodia 2009*; Global Witness, *Country for Sale: how Cambodia's Elite has Captured the Country's Extractive Industries*; Grimsditch and Henderson, *Untitled: Tenure Insecurity and Inequality in the Cambodian Land Sector*; Guttal, *Alienation of Land and Resources in Cambodia*, 9-18; Beban and Work, *The Spirits are Crying: Dispossession and Possessing Bodies in Rural Cambodia*, 1-18; for the problem on the global scale, see M. Kenney-Lazar, "Dispossession, Semi-Proletarianization, and Enclosure: Primitive Accumulation and the Land Grab in Laos" (Sussex, Future Agricultures, 6-8 April, 2011); Hall D., "Rethinking Primitive Accumulation: Theoretical Tensions and Rural Southeast Asian Complexities," *Antipode* 44, no. 4 (2012), 1188-1208; Saturnino Borras and Jennifer Franco, *Political Dynamics of Land Grabbing in SouthEast Asia* (Amsterdam: Transnational Institute, 2011).

³ LICHADO, *Briefing Paper: Cambodia's Draft Law on the Management and use of Agricultural Land* (Phnom Penh: LICHADO, 2012); Grimsditch and Henderson, *Untitled: Tenure Insecurity and Inequality in the Cambodian Land Sector*; Simon Springer, "Illegal Evictions? Overwriting Possession and Orality with Law's Violence in Cambodia," *Journal of Agrarian Change* (2012); East-West Management Institute, *Land Law of Cambodia: A Study and Research Manual*. (Phnom Penh: Asian Development Bank, 2003), 241.

⁴ O'Keefe, *Land is Life: Land Conflict Interventions in Cambodia. A Review of Case Studies and NGO Perceptions*; R. Mueller, "Management of State and Public Sector Land- TS04H" (Marrakech, Morocco, Friday, 20 May, 11-12.30, 2011).

None of my friends in Sambok Dung were victims of the land grabs that have accompanied these large-scale concessions, but the potential loss of land was an undercurrent among all the rural farmers I encountered. Plantation agriculture has stepped up the process of deforestation country-wide, but in Sambok Dung it did not increase as much as it co-opted the work of timber extraction already supporting local subsistence. What I heard were laments about appropriation of livelihoods rather than the destruction of the forest. Nonetheless, the decreasing potential of their sustaining forest haunts their stories.

How in this place

I lived with a family during my time in the village. Mother aged 54, Father aged 50, Daughter aged 20, Son-in-law aged 24, and grandchild aged 3. I became very close to the family and was treated as one of them. Som, the mother, became my older sister and I was auntie and grandmother to her children and grandchildren, but with a respectful honorific from the children. The Son-in-law worked with me as a sort of research assistant, helping me navigate the neighborhood and to ease people into my presence. All interactions were conducted using the Khmer language, although sometimes, especially in the beginning, my assistant helped them understand my funny accent and formal language and helped me learn the distinct colloquialisms and vocabularies of village life.

I began my research with informal ‘meetings’ with the village head, the police chief, the head Buddhist monk, called a *cau`adhikār*, the learned elders in the Cham community, called *tuen*, and the community of landed Buddhist villagers who formed

my older sister's circle of friends. These were broad gathering missions through which I learned the number of residents in the village, the wide overview of yearly ritual events, and began to know some of the families. I arrived in the middle of the rainy season and the transplanting was nearly complete.

I spent a few days learning how to transplant rice and meeting new people, then began calling on my new acquaintances in their homes for semi-formal interviews. Daily schedules in a village of subsistence farmers are flexible and I would just show up at people's homes and asked if they had time to sit and talk. I would spend from one to three hours talking with people about their lives. I asked questions about the family: how many and how old? About how long and how they came to be in Sambok Dung; about family economies and land holdings; about religious practices and beliefs... These conversations were often winding and circuitous, weaving through life trajectories, children and grandchildren, pre-war, post-war, births and deaths.

Once I visited with all my known acquaintances, I started going down the streets to meet new families and slowly I made myself known to most of the people in the village and they became partially known to me. There were 206 families in Sambok Dung, and by the time I left the village I had collected these informal histories from 185 of them. I also attended all village events for which I was present in the village; religious ceremonies, village meetings, weddings...

It was at these village events that I discovered the power of the photograph for directing interviews, building trust, and offering desired gifts to people. I would take pictures of individual participants, both upon request and candid shots and have them

developed into prints when I went to the city. Upon return, I would find the faces in the photos and meet those families. This gave me records of who was at what events and let me get to know people in terms of the events they attended.

I recorded most interviews by hand as many of my interlocutors were uncomfortable with the voice recorder. I did use voice recordings with anyone in an official capacity on most occasions. Still photography, voice recordings, and notebook were my methods for gathering data and I used them according to the situation and the comfort level of my interlocutors. I quickly became a known entity in the village and had numerous casual conversations with people as we all went about our business.

I left the village after one complete turn of the seasons and have returned twice for follow up research. My total time in Sambok Dung was 18 months. Interspersed in this time was archival and library research in Phnom Penh and meetings with professors, government officials, and international aid organizations.

What follows is an effort to think about the total experience of living among subsistence farmers at the edge of the economic development initiatives moving into this now peaceful region. There are so many stories that remain untold. The one I chose to tell, about empire and extraction, subsistence and accumulation, is the one that left the most profound mark on me and the one that occupied the thoughts and activities of my friends in the village. I hope that my words here do justice to their stories.

Introduction

Under the tides of empire we dance to the rhythms of life and death. With and without markets, priests, and prime ministers there is arising and there is passing. Families and food, rain, wind, and shelter: the insistent motion of being in the landscape. Dependent, old forms and new morph and negotiate the environment, articulating various conceptions of community and accommodating multiple ecologies of mind and energy. Descriptive categories, like Religion, Politics, or Economics that obscure the interconnectedness of all social and material processes have no foothold in this place at the unstable boundary of empire.

The following pages attend to the constant motion of being: of mobile families, of social status, of sun, rice, and of dwelling in the contact zone. Sambok Dung sits at the edge of the forest and at the frontier of imperial expansion. It is an interstitial place between subsistence and accumulation. In the current era we dwell in the presence of extractive technologies and global flows of capital and governance and my story attends to the intentional movements that bring both dwelling and its technological mediation into being. This is not necessarily a story of the inhabitants of this remote village; rather, it is a story of how I experienced them: the mountains and the rice farmers, the Buddhists and the Cham, the buffalo, the trees, the spirits and the timber traders at the edge of the forest. The coming into being that I describe is neither unidirectional nor consistent in form; it arises dependent on and embedded in materiality and in mind.

In Sambok Dung, the forest is becoming village as rice fields push into the scrubby second-growth; the trees are at once spirit places, local resources, and transnational commodities. The village is becoming connected as trails of subsistence transform into roads solid only in their imminence. The landscape shifts and accommodates the changing values and needs of its many inhabitants. It also constrains and directs them: thwarting some and allowing others. The roads

harden with bursts of capital investment, and then disperse with seasonal rains and depleted funds; places of worship transform from thatch huts into bright concrete structures that exceed the capacity of local economies, but embedded them in national and transnational flows of capital, influence, and care.

I could have chosen any one or another of these processes as the focus of this dissertation. My original plan was to study Religion. This was quickly expanded as villagers voiced concerns and engagements with their diminishing access to the forest, with arrests and fines for cutting timber, with the Economic Land Concessions (ELC) and land insecurity, with the coming roads, and the promise and perils of development. Each of the chapters I offer could be dissertations in themselves. They explore the concerns and activities of villagers as I understand them through my months of observation and questioning; concerns that go beyond but circle around and through the religion I initially intended to examine. I choose to present these chapters together in an effort to think holistically about life at the edge of the Cambodian forest.

To do this I deploy theoretical paradigms in such a way as to privilege the events and processes I encountered rather than hold true to discrete categories of knowledge and intellectual lineages. In the following pages one will encounter materialist, structural, phenomenological, and ontological interpretations of my experiences and encounters. Each differently engages particular aspects of the elephant and blurs the categories privileged by contemporary scholarship. In the contact zone, religion looks like politics while magic insists on the moral codes of religion. At the frontier of empire, human agency is tenuous and fleeting against the backdrop of the weather-world, and the economic line between subsistence and accumulation is articulated through acts of state. I will proceed here to introduce some of the paradigms and

vocabularies that I appropriate and alter; a definition of terms, so to speak, that should introduce the reader to the intended effect of this compilation.

Empires and Epistemologies

This is a story of ebbing and flowing. Of transformation? Yes, but not from one thing into another. There is neither finishing nor ending; the old does not give way to the new. There is only insistent motion, alteration, adjustment, blending: constantly in flux, but never achieving the wholly other. Traces remain and trajectories change. I use the metaphor of tides to invoke this process that suggests transformation. The incoming tide swallows the landscape, at once obscuring, illuminating, and adding to what was already present. Things seem wholly other. When the tide recedes the landscape is littered with debris, but is only slightly altered. It remains largely as it was before. Not radical transformations, only slight alterations: add some, take some, move sand.

I use this metaphor of ebbing and flowing tides to complicate the unidirectional, destination-oriented ecologies engendered by the imperial projects of development, progress, and economic intensification. I further complicate contemporary development initiatives by discussing them under the loaded and loadable rubric of empire. The empire I invoke is not a discrete object, but is present in its multiplicity amid the comings and goings of Cambodian villagers. I use the term in a deliberately unbounded way in an effort to think about the traces and choices people and communities make as they deploy the detritus of past imperial tides amid the flow of the present.

The region currently discussed as Cambodia has played host to multiple imperial formations. It fostered the spread of the Khmer Empire, which ebbed and flowed over the lives of farmers, hunters, and gatherers in mainland Southeast Asia for fifteen-hundred years after the

beginning of the common era. The cosmology, textual, and ritual traditions of these expansionist Khmer kings was influenced by the Indic traditions, whose kings in what is now called South Asia began their spread and appropriation of territories and peoples three thousand years earlier. Indic cosmologies and governing systems took distinctive form in Southeast Asia and spread with the temples of the Khmer kings. Over their 1.5 millennia of influence in the region, they also encountered the claims and systems of the emperors of China to the north and of Champa to the east. Khmer influence waned and Champa fell as the kings of Ayutthaya and the emperors of the Viet rose in the west and east respectively. At about the same time the expanding power of European kings and priests arrived; since that time, over the last five hundred years, European cosmologies and systems of governance have spread over the region (and much of the globe).

I entered the village of Sambok Dung in what is today called Cambodia at the height and fullest expansion of this most recent imperial formation. The unfinished, half-finished, decayed, and re-emerging markers of the earliest moments of the contemporary empire, the rotting railroad, the brick shell of a colonial era shop, and especially the re-emerging land grabs, plantations, mines, and timber extraction, invoked for me Ann Stoler's image of "imperial debris." The "dissociated and dislocated histories of the present... sites and circumstances of dispossession that imperial architects disavow as not of their making... and that go by other names."¹

These markers of imperial space, currently renamed development, entail the appropriation of resources and labor, but always imply progress and righteous power. Amid these are other material productions that speak not to power, but to the fragility of empire: washed-out roads and brightly minted houses of worship. The soft roads of this emerging state

¹ Ann Laura Stoler, *Imperial Debris: On Ruins and Ruination* (Durham; London: Duke University Press, 2013), p. 8.

are no match for the forces of the wind and rain and the heavy trucks of industrial expansion; the bright new temples testify to their complete destruction during the Khmer Rouge era, an alternate but failed mode of imperial expansion, appropriation, and extraction.

Under the canopy of empire that I deploy in the coming pages, my reader will find the returning markers of capitalist expansion; the legacy of socialist market poverty and land allocation; the destruction of infrastructure and families by the Khmer Rouge; the building boom of Sihanouk's post-independence years; the buildings and extractive legacies of the French; the temples, monastics, and esoteric practices of the Khmer kings; and the governments, goals, and technologies that attended each tide of imperial power laying claim to the land and lives of the people in this region. I allow the effects of each imperial incursion to remain, and resist the temptation to resignify as savage, romantic, uncivilized, evil, or backward the practices of previous imperial formations.

I attend to the persistent "governing grammar" of imperial regimes.² I do not intend to fold the contemporary history of capitalist expansion into an imperial genealogy. Nonetheless, by allowing that genealogy presence, it exposes a classificatory topology deployed by Cambodian villagers that is good to think with. There is something distinctive about the territorial, extractive, and civilizing projects of kings and prime ministers that, despite idiosyncratic modes of imperial comportment, leave similar traces on the lives and geographies that remain amid their comings and goings. It is often the idiosyncratic modes that are privileged and parsed out by scholars. The kings of Southeast Asia presided over distinctive configurations of space and established legitimacy in particular ways that color execution of contemporary imperial projects.³ What I am

² Ann Laura Stoler, "Introduction 'the Rot Remains': From Ruins to Ruination," in *Imperial Debris: On Ruins and Ruination*, ed. Ann Laura Stoler (Durham; London: Duke University Press, 2013), pp. 22-23.

³ See, for example Clifford Geertz, *Negara: The Theatre State in Nineteenth-Century Bali* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980); Stanley J. Tambiah, *World Conqueror and World Renouncer* (Cambridge: Cambridge

concerned with is not the ways these empires are different, but rather, the ways they are the same and carry marks that go beyond the material to include legends, deities, and truth-claims about what it means to be human.

Imperial formations posit a primacy to the human animal that I have not yet fully explored. This dissertation begins that work. Human primacy is especially acute in the contemporary era in which all that is not human is rendered inert, insentient, and available for servitude to the human project.⁴ This way of viewing the human in the world is suggestively distinct from other ideas about how the properly ordered world should look and the embeddedness of the human animal in non-human networks of both physical and social interdependence.⁵ My friends in Sambok Dung walk between these worlds; for them the hunter has long been vilified in favor of agricultural production,⁶ and the sentience of the rice is not invoked in the ways it once was,⁷ but the sentient potential of snakes, trees, and fresh-water springs remain.⁸

University Press, 1976); O. W. Wolters, *History, Culture, and Region in Southeast Asian Perspectives* (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 1982).

⁴ For suggestive discussions on the constructed boundary between nature and culture see, Philippe Descola, *Beyond Nature and Culture*, trans. Janet Lloyd (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013); Marshall Sahlins, *The Western Illusion of Human Nature: With Reflections on the Long History of Hierarchy, Equality and the Sublimation of Anarchy in the West, and Comparative Notes on Other Conceptions of the Human Condition* (Chicago, Ill.: Prickly Paradigm Press, 2008); Philippe Descola and Gísli Pálsson, "Nature and Society: Anthropological Perspectives" (Routledge, 1996). The implication of slavery and servitude is my own and points to a yet inchoate suggestion that the constructed separation of the human from nature provides a foundational grammar upon which genocidal projects of sovereignty play out.

⁵ Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, "Perspectival Anthropology and the Method of Controlled Equivocation," *Tipiti: Journal of the Society for the Anthropology of Lowland South America* 2, no. 1:3 (2004), 22; Nurit Bird-David, "'Animism' Revisited: Personhood, Environment, and Relational Epistemology [and Comments and Reply]," *Current Anthropology* 40 (1999), S67-S91; A. Irving Hallowell, *Ojibwa Ontology, Behavior, and World View*, eds. Jennifer S. H. Brown and Susan Elaine Gray (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2010).

⁶ During a harvest ceremony recorded in the 1930s the words of the Buddha are invoked, which explicitly call the hunter to leave his subsistence lifestyle and come grow rice in abundance. Eveline Porée-Maspero, *Étude Sur Les Rites Agraires Des Cambodgiens*. (Paris: Mouton, 1962), 586-87.

⁷ In remote areas of the Cambodian countryside ceremonies that call the soul of the rice are still performed. For a discussion of this system in Siem Reap province see, Chouléan Ang, *Brah Ling* (Phnom Penh: Reyum, 2004).

⁸ For a nice discussion on the idea of sentient potentiality of all things through dependent relationality, but not each and every thing each and every time, see Rane Willerslev, "Taking Animism Seriously, but perhaps Not Too Seriously?" *Religion and Society: Advances in Research* 4, no. 1 (2013), p. 49.

The question of sentience and sociality, of who is and is not invited into the social world, becomes apparent as a distinctly political project, rather than a project of natural ordering, at the edge of the forest. Distinct ontologies that define ‘nature’ as nothing more than resources for exploitation, disrupt social relationships with spirits and level their places of dwelling to make way for plantation agriculture. The power of ancient trees and particular snakes remain, but are beginning to fade into legend. The primacy of the human determines who can make claims to power and to resources, and about how properly ordered individuals should behave. The distinctive imperial detritus that remains and comes anew in Sambok Dung flows over physical and social relationships with land, with plants, with spirits, and with animals, with modes of production, of consumption, of transportation, and with the material production of space. I expand my inquiry to include the other-than-human interlocutors in the region of Sambok Dung in an effort to decenter human agency in such a way as to make space to not only question, but to see past the powerfully bounded story of contemporary consumer capitalism.

The empire I invoke attends to, but goes beyond, the global force of capitalist expansion currently attempting to smooth over the various social landscapes of the planet in the enactment of a distinctive type of producing and consuming person and environment. My story from the high-water mark of this imperial tide disrupts the picture of its novel and monolithic nature suggested by Hardt and Negri, for whom there is “a new logic... a new form of sovereignty... that governs the world.”⁹ The villagers in Sambok Dung are embedded in global flows of ideas and resources, but these are hardly new and barely mediated by global technologies that transmit the possibilities of disjuncture and difference.¹⁰ Such possibilities, I suggest, have always been present. The Stranger King invoked by Marshall Sahlins is never a total stranger: the presence

⁹ Michael Hardt and Negri, Antonio, *Empire* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2000), p. xi.

¹⁰ Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization* (Minneapolis, Minn.: University of Minnesota Press, 1996).

and possibilities of the Other are, and have always been available for consumption and appropriation.¹¹

Moreover, and this is the important point, the physical and social relationships with land, with spirits, and with the ideational and material reproduction of social life remains. Certain processes simply continue, *must* continue on a living planet, regardless of imperial style. The rot remains, as the poet suggests,¹² it remains alongside the unending enactment of life and death and is especially acute in the contemporary era. Nonetheless, the image that remains with me from the edge of the forest and the frontier of empire, after the genocide of modernity and before the carnage of industrialization, was the inevitable regeneration of dwelling. There are rhythms that continue, dependent on a living planet, regardless of imperial flows of capital: this is the dance of life and death.

Religion and Anthropology

In a forthcoming essay, Emiko Stock clearly maps the ways that rituals for calling the spirits explicitly enact this dance. During my stay in Sambok Dung it was between life and death that the spirits intervene: facilitating access to land, bringing the rains, healing the sick, but also punishing the greedy, sending the blight, and claiming lives that thrive and falter in the landscape. The range of spirit capacities are strikingly similar to those claimed by the state: access to territory and resources, provision of and rules surrounding the means of production, cures for illness, and punishments for social infractions. The state does not claim to bring the

¹¹ Marshall Sahlins, "The Stranger-King Or, Elementary Forms of the Politics of Life," *Indonesia & the Malay World* 36, no. 105 (2008), pp. 184-6.

¹² Ann Stoler launches her imperial critique using a poem by Derek Wollcot: *Ruins of a Great House*/ . . . A green lawn, broken by low walls of stone,/ Dipped to the rivulet, and pacing, I thought next/ Of men like Hawkins, Walter Raleigh, Drake,/ Ancestral murderers and poets, more perplexed/ In memory now by every ulcerous crime./ The world's green age then was a rotting lime/ Whose stench became the charnel galleon's text./ *The rot remains with us, the men are gone.*/ But, as dead ash is lifted in a wind/ That fans the blackening ember of the mind,/ My eyes burned from the ashen prose of Donne. Ann Laura Stoler, "Imperial Debris: Reflections on Ruins and Ruination," *Cultural Anthropology* 23, no. 2 (2008), 191-219.

rains, but the massive water works of Angkor and the irrigation projects currently funded by international development organizations do bring the water. As for blight and the claiming of lives, the spirit enacts these in a different register than state actors, but part of what I try to do in the coming pages is to set the stories of spirit and state side by side so that the grammar of spirit authority and the work of economic subsistence becomes visible as structuring nodes under the pomp and flash of imperial developments and market commodities.

The juxtaposition of spirit with state that I draw out disrupts, I suggest, the typical classification of spirit practices with what is today glossed under the term Religion. It also casts a strong light on that term Religion and the institutions and practices that adhere under its vast canopy of interpretation. Among academics of the contemporary era, relationships with spirits tend to be understood as another *type* of religion, as animism.¹³ Also among academics, religion is sometimes understood as another *type* of, or vehicle for state-style projects of power and domination.¹⁴ And further still, religion is the classificatory and symbolic system through which humans access the restorative power of the divine.¹⁵

In Cambodia, the classification of animism as a subset of religion, or as part of a triumvirate (Buddhism, Brahmanism, and Animism) that makes up Khmer religion in Cambodia, puts spirits into the same classificatory field as Buddhism. This, I suggest, misrepresents spirit

¹³ This classification slides instantly into the slippery realm in which academics attempt to draw lines that demarcate animism from totemism, Descola and Pálsson, *Nature and Society: Anthropological Perspectives*; that define animism as opposed to naturalism, Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, "Cosmologies: Perspectivism," *Hau Network of Ethnographic Theory* Masterclass Series 1 (2012), pp. 86-88; and into numerous accounts of shamanic, medium inspired encounters, Pedersen, Morten Axel, *Not quite Shamans: Spirit Worlds and Political Lives in Northern Mongolia* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2011); Didier Bertrand, "The Names and Identities of the "Boramey" Spirits Possessing Cambodian Mediums," *Asian Folklore Studies* 60, no. 1 (2001), 31-47.

¹⁴ Talal Asad, *Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993); Giorgio Agamben, *The Kingdom and the Glory: For a Theological Genealogy of Economy and Government (Homo Sacer II, 2)* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2011); Tomoko Masuzawa, *The Invention of World Religions, Or, how European Universalism was Preserved in the Language of Pluralism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005).

¹⁵ Robert A. Orsi, *Between Heaven and Earth: The Religious Worlds People make and the Scholars Who Study them* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2005); Charles Hallisey, "'it Not the Only One': Womanist Resources for Reflection in Buddhist Studies," *Buddhist-Christian Studies* 32, no. 1 (2012), 73-85.

activities and engagements and obscures the relationship between spirit traditions and Buddhism. The most significant misrepresentation is the idea that spirit, and the power that travels through spirit into human social life via the ascetic practices and physiological proclivities of certain human actors, is *supernatural*. The genealogy of this notion of transcendent, *supernatural*, power is not my focus here, but it adheres to the notion of religion in Cambodia through the Brahmanist tradition in ways that strongly influence Buddhist practice, despite the very real-world teachings of the Buddha.

Spirit power, however, is different than Buddha power. The Buddha does not punish; one's own actions bring about good or bad results in interdependence with other social and material processes. The spirit is one of those processes and the spirit does punish. For my Buddhist friends in Sambok Dung, as for many other individuals on the planet, there is nothing other-worldly about spirits or their power. Spirit power is not accessed or inflicted in one's next life nor does it come from somewhere outside of the material world. This is clear and present power and spirit relationships are very much embedded in the events and processes of the momentary world.¹⁶

This, I suggest, is another part of what embroils them with Buddhism. The religions that travel the globe attending kings, emperors, colonial masters, and prime ministers enter people's lives in various ways. My research suggests that the spirits, already a present source of authority and power in those lives, engage with the new imperial forms as do all aspects of the social and

¹⁶ This idea takes a few shapes and beyond my own experiences and readings already cited along the ontological turn, my thinking along these lines is also informed by post-colonial studies of the occult, Michael T. Taussig, *Shamanism, Colonialism, and the Wild Man: A Study in Terror and Healing* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986); Michael Taussig, *The Magic of the State* (New York: Routledge, 1997); Jean Comaroff and John L. Comaroff, "Modernity and its Malcontents: Ritual and Power in Postcolonial Africa" University of Chicago Press, 1993); Jean Comaroff and John L. Comaroff, *Of Revelation and Revolution* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991); John Pemberton, "The Ghost in the Machine," in *Photographs East*, ed. R. Morris (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2009); Rosalind C. Morris, *In the Place of Origins: Modernity and its Mediums in Northern Thailand* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2000).

physical landscape to which empire lays claim. There is a structure, a grammar, through which these relationships of power and of social hierarchy are enacted. Part of that structure, I suggest, grows from their embeddedness in the material world and their direct reference to the transformation and accumulation of material forms. The following chapters illustrate this in the form of both modern development projects and the material productions of religious institutions.

The structure is only part of what my story brings out, however, and there is an inherent instability in the hierarchal formations of religion as a project of the state. This manifests in shifting and mutable forms that belie the solidity of structure. Spirits at once are and inhabit mountains, they are also turned into mountains by kings or the Buddha; morally infused religious concepts like merit inform a wide variety of behaviors from laundering money via temple donations to talking with snakes and mountain spirits; and thatch and wood houses of local worship transform into concrete and tile nodes of international capital and influence, subverting national authority but attending to the needs of resource-poor villagers.

Under the tides of imperial religion remains the caring, reciprocal, and morally attentive comportment that relationships with religion and with the spirit both entail. Spirits are locally conceived as part of Buddhist practice by the majority, but are also acknowledged as part of the juridical arm of the state, and continue as a point of liaison and access to the power of the planet. In this study, I attempt to acknowledge the circulating power that the Khmer language renders as *pāramī*. The term comes from the Indic language of Pālī and in Buddhist canonical texts is associated with the perfection of the Buddha. In Khmer, however, it is power; it circulates and adheres in people, places, and spirits.

Pāramī is an agentive force and my treatment of it, and of the spirits, trees, snakes, monks, and ascetic practitioners, in the following pages “takes seriously” local uses and

conceptions. With this move I attempt to decenter human agency and to make room for other possibilities and forces that are beyond human control and intent. With this move, I follow a growing number of anthropologists willing to disrupt the notion that spirit traditions and religious activities are methods for explaining the world, “metaphors” that construct parallels between the natural and the cultural worlds.¹⁷ They seem rather to be engagements with the world, a world in which the snakes and the trees, the mountains and the spirits, the rice, the rains, and the humans are all part of the cultural world. The decentering of the human is not a dismissing of the importance of human agency; it only places that agency within a larger web of significance woven by multiple authors with unknowable agendas.

Genocide and Imperial Grammar

My project of decentering travels through the modern empire of capital currently smoothing over the imperial effects of all past systems of territorial expansion and resource extraction; it moves to the rhythms of stories that separate humans from the productive planet, attaching them to divine power external to the palpable forces of the natural world; and it considers the lives of Cambodian villagers beyond the three years, eight months, and twenty days of Democratic Kampuchea.

I do not treat the Khmer Rouge years directly, rather I allow them presence as one of the many imperial effects that emerged in certain times and places during my stay at the edge of the forest. I suggest that genocide is not an anomaly, but is rather constitutive of imperial forms.¹⁸ I further suggest, but will not explore in these pages, that the atrocities of the Khmer Rouge years are a point of fascination and spectacle for political and social elites. Memoirs and films created

¹⁷ Tim Ingold. *The Perception of the Environment: Essays on Livelihood, Dwelling & Skill* (London; New York: Routledge, 2000) p. 51.

¹⁸ See also, Ben Kiernan, *Blood and Soil: A World History of Genocide and Extermination from Sparta to Darfur* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007).

by the literate urbanite victims of egalitarian horror dominate the narrative of displacement. The stories I heard from non-elite, lightly-literate villagers were both dramatic and banal, none who were alive remained unaffected, but the standard total view from the urban perspective is unrepresentative of the majority experience. *It was better then*, was a refrain that I often heard. *We suffered, we died, and life was hard. But we all suffered together. Today we still suffer, but we can see many who don't, like him, like you.* The 'like you' in that refrain was directed at me, the white anthropologist who came to live among them.

I was often asked about my salary and about life in my country, where people imagined the rule of law and the fair and equal distribution of resources. They asked if there were farmers, like them and I told them about factory farmed food; I told them about the rents and utilities that consumed my meager salary (which seemed astronomical to them), of the size of my educational debt, and that it was the leaders of my country who appointed the Khmer Rouge to hold Cambodia's seat in the United Nations until the 1991 peace agreements, prolonging the fighting and destabilizing attempts to recover from the shared trauma of a failed revolution. Those same western leaders now sponsor the elaborate trials to convict the leaders of the Khmer Rouge for their crimes before they die, sponsoring a flurry of expatriate salaries.

Beyond this critical commentary, the following pages will attend to the destruction of the Khmer Rouge years only as they appeared through my engagements with the people who lived at the edge of the forest and the frontier of empire. I attend more closely to the promise and perils of the coming imperial tide.

The first chapter is a story of movement and details the stories people told me about how they came to be in this place. All these stories wandered through the years of displacement and changes to land tenure that accompanied the imperial grammar of the communist states. This

chapter situates the reader in the built and unbuilt environments where the rest of the story takes place. It also introduces the theoretical and operational framework of the story. The second chapter attends to contemporary development initiatives through an examination of the roads and trails in the village, which connect villagers to each other and their subsistence livelihoods and to the markets and programs of the coming empire. Chapter three introduces the spirits of the land and their social and physical place in the village. Chapter four plays with history and the diasporic stories of the Cham minority, who are currently pointing their energies toward the external funding of global Islam. Chapter five deals with the merit making and temple building that attends Buddhist practice. Merit is a flexible concept that easily and simultaneously holds the imperial grammars of Indic, colonial, and modern conceptions of social power, but does not fully contain them.

I do not resolve all of the tensions I set up in this piece. They do not really resolve; the material structures are only fleetingly solid; they arise, remain, and dissolve dependent on the multiple energies and events that are productive of time and space as conceived by discrete nodes of conscious existence. The effect I hope to portray is one of movement and incessant change, but I also want my reader to feel the surprising constancy that underlies the rippling motion of the waves. Under the tides of empire, both before and after, in and through the destruction, the display, the displacement, and the stories of utopian other-worlds, we dwell and we subsist. We dance to the rhythm of life and death.

Shaping the Space: Movement and Structure

*The essence of production lies as much or more in the attentional quality of the action ... and in its developmental effects on the producer, as in any images or representations of ends to be achieved.*¹

*There is a sharp distance between 'ideal' space (what we think and conjecture) and 'real' space which is social practice: each underpins and presupposes the other.*²

Entangled Power: Mountains, Spirits, and the Chinese Companies

Where the eastern slopes of the Cardamom Mountains flatten into a mound dotted plain in Western Cambodia sits the village of Sambok Dung. The mountain range is a dense field that holds Cambodia's tallest peak and spreads west, north, and south from the village to the Thai border and the gulf of Siam (map 1); northeast from the village is Phnaṃ Kuk, a long low mountain that houses powerful spirits and marks the end of the range, after which the land slopes gently into the Tonle Sāp. According to *tā Mān*, the elder *ācārya* (pronounced Adja) at the Buddhist temple,³ the Cardamom Mountains are the origin of the country, original because the country was articulated through the ancient spirits that reside in the mountains.

In the earliest times the only land was the mountains, they were islands then; water covered the whole country. The spirits were in those islands and they make up the body of the country today. In the south, Phnaṃ Būkago and Phnaṃ Me Dýng, these are the feet of Kambujā [Cambodia]. In the north, Phnaṃ Sāmphau and Phnaṃ Kraboe, these are the head. Here, we are in the heart of Kambujā. Phnaṃ Aural is the highest mountain and this place where we sit was once the ocean.

¹ Tim Ingold, *Being Alive: Essays on Movement, Knowledge and Description* (London; New York: Routledge, 2011), p. 6.

² Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space* (Oxford, OX, UK; Cambridge, Mass., USA: Blackwell, 1991), p. 14.

³ The *ācārya* is a learned lay man who lives at the temple and assists the monks with the mundane activities of running the temple and the special acts of ritual performances. They were often monks in their younger years and many *ācārya* are spiritually powerful individuals who are well respected in the community.

The mountains inform people's lives here; in the rainy season dark clouds gather in their folds and spread out over the sun-drenched village; igniting rainbows in the unstable contact zones. Rainbows, I was told, are held in place by giants, [*yakkh*], dangerous protectors of the kingdom.⁴ One never seeks out the ends of the rainbow, but when they are held in place—when you can see the ends go all the way to the ground—the rains will come and the land underneath will be protected and bountiful.⁵

The water flows down from the Cardamom range and Sambok Dung has soft marshy places even in the dry season. Phnam Tā `Aū, the *Mountain of Grandfather Flowing Water*, is the tallest mound in the valley and marks the eastern edge of the village (map 2). It shares its name with the neighboring village to the east and with the Buddhist temple that sits in its northern shade.⁶ The fields that spread out from the mountain are low and hold the water that runs from the tree-filled hill during the rainy season. The Cambodian language does not distinguish between hills and mountains and the word *phnam* applies to both. Phnam Tā `Aū is not terribly high, it takes less than an hour to climb the rugged trails to the top, nonetheless, it rises above everything else in the roughly four square kilometers that make up Sambok Dung.

The mountains define the landscape and mountain lore marks history. In Sambok Dung, the mountains constitute intimate histories, “place-based thoughts” that generate association, that travel through the thinker and the landscape in mutually constituting awareness.⁷ They also hold the abstracted stories of jealous goddesses and powerful crocodiles whose efforts to marry or to

⁴ Other-than-human protectors in Cambodia are all tinged with an element of danger. Many are land spirits domesticated into the service of kings, like the *yakkh*, or the Buddha, but their wild origins remain salient for outsiders and for those they protect.

⁵ There are legendary skirmishes between the spirits of the rains and the spirits of drought. Rainbows often play a role in these battles: they emerge with the defeat of drought sometimes coloring the hair of the defeated drought or the fur of the water spirit's dogs. Eveline Porée-Maspero, *Étude Sur Les Rites Agraires Des Cambodgiens*. (Paris: Mouton, 1962), pp 230-1.

⁶ The temple serves four adjacent villages.

⁷ Keith H. Basso, *Wisdom Sits in Places: Landscape and Language among the Western Apache* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1996), pp. 7,107.

destroy the Buddha or a king set them in pursuit, and whose defeat set them in stone.⁸ Their spirits are said to inhabit the mountains they became as *'anak tã*, tutelary spirits of the land and forests, pronounced *neak ta*. Stories make place and make claims to history, ownership, and association. Basso's work explores the ways that place names establish not only memory but belonging. The Apache ancestors came to the place and they named it; the name was a place-based thought, bringing the tactile presence of the land into the minds and lives of the people who named it, but also attaching the people to the place, "this place may help us to survive," the ancestors said.⁹ The story told by tã Mien of *'anak tã* spirits inhabiting the mountains long before the rise of kings and continuing to articulate and protect the land suggests a place-based thought.

The mountains in Cambodia are powerful places that connect the land, the forests, the spirits, and the people. The mountains provide subsistence and represent at once security and danger; forest spirits are capricious, wild animals unpredictable, and the potential for illness runs high. Nonetheless, everything that creates social life comes from the forest: wood for houses and drums, plants for medicine and soup, resins for incense and baskets, and land for new rice fields. When the oceans rise, the mountains remain and their enduring presence attaches people to a deep history of place infused by ancient spirits, ancestors, the exploits of kings, and the travels of the Buddha. Tã Mien tells us that the ancient spirits are entangled in the contact zone between water and land and that the origin of the country is part of that interplay; the mountain spirits have always been here, they are the head, feet, and heart of the country, and where we sit was once the ocean. The stories of kings and the Buddha are of a different sort. They do not connect

⁸ Porée-Maspero, *Étude Sur Les Rites Agraires Des Cambodgiens*. pp. 106-12.

⁹ Basso, *Wisdom Sits in Places: Landscape and Language among the Western Apache*, p. 12.

the land to the people, but rather connect the land and all its inhabitants, spirits, plants, animals, and people to the kings and their priests.

In these tales of appropriation, the agency is reversed. Rather than the mountain making the country, the king makes the mountain. These stories are many and involve variations on the themes of unrequited love or struggles for domination, in which a powerful witch or a spurned lover chase the king or the Buddha across the land. In the final scene the virtuous ruler or some protective agent transforms the attacker into a mountain that stands through time bearing the story of imperial power.

In recent years the tenor of appropriation has changed along with imperial strategies and stories that legitimate the change in ownership. The wild that is the forest, as opposed to the domesticated spaces of the village, has a new powerful entity with which villagers must now contend: *the Chinese company*. This is the name locally conferred upon all operations currently moving into the region, clearing forest, and establishing large-scale plantation operations. The *Chinese company* has claim to the land by virtue of the ELC discussed in the prologue, and they hire the services of local soldiers and police to protect their interests. Travel in the forest now includes the fear of the company and their representatives along with the dangers of undomesticated spirits and forest animals. Just like the forest, however, the company offers the means of subsistence. The stories of economic development tell of roads, jobs, health care centers, and schools that will transform subsistence farmers into market consumers and provide the tools necessary for social life, just as the forest has always done.

The forest is transforming from the dangerous but constant purveyor of all subsistence and authority for kings and peasants alike to a still dangerous contact zone in which the untamed elements of the natural world meet the semi-domesticated elements of corporate investment and

the bureaucratic apportioning of land. Like the kings who appropriated the power of spirit-mountains through stories of divine royal transformation, from contentious power into stone, the companies and the development initiatives that fuel them are enacting another divine transformation through which all land falls into the service of and is transformed into goods for the market economy. Villagers in Sambok Dung feel the dangerous necessity inherent in the stories of the current empire. Schools, roads, health care, and jobs are of paramount importance in the current environment, just as forest products were necessary in environments of the recent past. The dangers are not the same but interestingly echo one another. When villagers first came to cut fields from these forests, they asked permission from the spirit-owner of the land, who will be properly introduced in Chapter 3. They feared that if they angered or offended the spirit, access to land and subsistence would be denied and their attempts to make a living from the land would fail. *We make offerings to the spirit so that our work bears fruit. If we offend the spirit we will have no harvest.* Fears of loss and the inability to achieve subsistence remain with the new owners of the land and many local villagers fear they will lose their land holdings to the claims of the company, as has been happening across the country.

Large-scale landgrabs that accompany the current imperial transfer of resource ownership have not directly impacted life in Sambok Dung. In fact, they are among the land-receiving and not the land-losing players. The constant presence of the coming global economy, filled with promise and threats, just like the constant presence and danger of the forest, inform all aspects of life in Sambok Dung. My story does not focus on either the forest or the development initiatives currently transforming it, but holds the powerful forces of each present in the background of daily village life, which is how I experienced it through the rhythms and stories of my interlocutors. The stories of powerful kings, of high-speed roads, of communicative snakes, and

freshly minted houses of worship connect villagers at once to the traditions of the past and the promises of the future. These stories are, I suggest, little bits of imperial debris that dot the physical and cognitive landscapes and the contact zones of contemporary rural Cambodians.

Theoretical Interlude

The imperial debris I invoke here is embedded in the landscape through stories of hierarchy, power, and appropriation that are the antithesis of the place-based thoughts generating association and mutual awareness. Subsequent chapters will also attend to the material formations that lie in empire's wake and rise as harbingers of the empire to come: particularly important in Sambok Dung are houses of worship and the railroad. Ann Laura Stoler describes the pieces of imperial debris with an eye toward their continued life and the way that the "less perceptible effects" of empire settle into the "social and material ecologies" of people's lives.¹⁰ She suggests that the detritus of empire lives on in ways that are often dislodged from their generation, problems cast in a modern light like 'urban decay' or 'racialized unemployment' are among the poignant examples she offers.¹¹ Her call is to attend not to the ruin, as if it is something past now rendered static, but rather to the continuing process: not to the ruin but to ruination.

This process is visible in the contact zone of Sambok Dung, where incoming imperial effects lay visibly over the debris of those that have come and gone before. In this village at the edge of the forest in Cambodia the European colonial empire to which Stoler exclusively attends is only the most recent in a long history of imperial appropriations that have settled into the 'social and material ecologies' of people's lives. It is not my intention to fold everything of the

¹⁰ Ann Laura Stoler, *Imperial Debris: On Ruins and Ruination* (Durham; London: Duke University Press, 2013), p. 4.

¹¹ Ibid. p.18.

present moment into an imperial genealogy, but rather, following Stoler's suggestion to attend to the "*evasive* history of empire,"¹² I expand her scope by attending to the renamed detritus of other imperial moments. Examining the layers of debris that accumulate amid the ebbing and flowing tides of empire presents some continuity between each episode of appropriation.

Taking this stance of the *longue durée* does two things that are important for representing the histories I encountered in Sambok Dung. The first is to make less remarkable the trauma and glory of the ongoing European imperial expansion: for my interlocutors this is but one in a long history of invasions and transformations of power. The second is to re-member the *elusive* relationship between land and subsistence (which collects the problems of the weather-world, of healing, and of dwelling) that embroiled the spirit-owner of the land with the king and the priest, and to examine the ways that this relationship between land and subsistence remains at the center of imperial projects even though the labels of development and human rights move the conversation away from imperial appropriations.

The deep connections between imperial projects and the land upon which they play out bring the space of encounter together with its material and ideational traces through time. Such is the advantage of remembering the *longue durée*, especially in the face of the monolithic modern and its attendant colonial rupture. I do not, however, want the invocation of deep history to slide into the static and suggest ruins, objects for study of the way things were. This is not at all the way that my interlocutors live with the cosmologies, technologies, and modes of production that ebb and flow into their lives along the changing tides of imperial power. To avoid solidifying what is in constant iteration I will attend to the traces of empire, but only as they mark unstable boundaries between which the rhythmic beats of daily life and quotidian concerns pulse. Henri

¹² Ibid. p.23.

Lefebvre also concerns himself with the interplay between the constant repetitions of daily life that go on with or without imperial machinations and the “things around which our everyday life establishes itself” that are the conscious productions of imperial space.¹³

Lefebvre is concerned with another obscuring that compliments and echoes Stoler’s attention to the displacement of imperial debris in which the violence of the present is renamed and disengaged from its imperial origins. Lefebvre suggests that the objects and productions of social space, created in the service of capitalist production and consumption, attain the illusion of solidity in the movements and energies of individual bodies within that space. He is invoking at once diachronic time and the constant iteration of the synchronic moment, the “interpenetration of spaces,” that he suggests are constantly, “inheriting, accommodating, and reorganizing what has come before.”¹⁴ But the resolution is false, a simulation that at once “amplifies the present”, obscures the rhythms of subsistence and family, and “conceals the production of repetitive time and space.”¹⁵

Concealing the constancy of time and quotidian affairs that require no power other than that of intention, obscuring the connections between imperial projects and the degraded social and physical landscapes in which people live, these are the homogenizing effects of imperial simulacra that I will attempt to look past as I recount the daily lives and practices of my interlocutors. The effects of empire were particularly visible to me as I moved through the rhythms of village life because of the heterogeneous nature of almost everything. The smoothness of system, whether forged by imperial machinations or by the forces of nature, was nowhere. Sambok Dung is a contact zone where the unstable boundaries of multiple imperial projects and multiple ways of being in the world are in close proximity mutually producing,

¹³ Henri Lefebvre, *Rhythmanalysis: Space, Time, and Everyday Life* (London; New York: Continuum, 2004), p. 7.

¹⁴ Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, p. 164

¹⁵ Lefebvre, *Rhythmanalysis: Space, Time, and Everyday Life*, pp. 31, 7

altering, and disintegrating one another. Mary Louise Pratt invokes “contact zones”, to suggest a place in which the mutual constitution of subjects occurs.¹⁶ I like Pratt’s evocative term, but extend it to better represent the contact zone of Sambok Dung.

For Pratt, the contact zone speaks specifically to the “space of colonial encounters... involving conditions of coercion, radical inequality, and intractable conflict.” With this term, she highlights European repression of the reciprocal nature of the colonial engagement and the “obsessive need to present and re-present its peripheries and its others continually to itself.”¹⁷ For my purposes, the idea of a messy, improvisational zone of contact will be stretched beyond Pratt’s colonial framework to include the many relationships of unequal power and difference that operate and come into being in the village of Sambok Dung, but will retain the sentiment of nagging and obsessive representations that obscure the reciprocal nature of encounters and the destructive nature of the process. These include encounters with empires past and present; with the power of the land, wind, and rain; as well as relationships with the governmentality and market systems of the present. My stretched interpretation of the contact zone is also an interstitial zone: a place sometimes in transition, moving from one way of being into another, from being forest to being village for example; and sometimes productively representing multiple ways of being in relation to multiple nodes of power at the same time.

Dwelling and the Rhythms of Power

The most visible way of being in the village of Sambok Dung is the way of being subsistence rice farmers. The earliest rice farmers that migrated from neighboring Pursat

¹⁶ Mary Louise Pratt, *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation* (London; New York: Routledge, 2008), p. 6.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 25.

province were Cham¹⁸ who came in the pre-war years to cut new fields from the forest in response to the population pressures of growing families. They claimed the low fields at the base of Phnām Tā `Aū that fill with water even in dry years. After the wars, when Cham and Khmer trickled into the newly peaceful environment in the late 1990s the manifestations of spiritual power of the mountain brought more Buddhists to these low fields and informed the decision to build the Buddhist temple at its base.

At that time, I was told, there were still tigers and large snakes on the mountain, but today the large animals are gone. The large trees remain on Phnām Tā `Aū and testify to the power of the spirits that reside there. On the rest of the mountains in the region, both the large animals and the large trees are gone. Small trees and plants, birds, snakes, and spirits, however, all continue to dwell in in these forests. Humans involved in collecting wood dwell here too and their hammocks, tents, and cook fires come and go under the canopy. In the flatlands at the base of the mountains are more permanent signs of those who build. Heidegger's notion of dwelling entangles the act of building and the experiential habit of being on the earth every day. As such, he insists that dwelling is deeply caught up in acts of peace, of cultivation, *and* of sparing: acts, he suggests, that gather together the earth, the sky, the divinities, and human society.¹⁹ His is an anthropocentric articulation that I will adjust slightly to accommodate other dwellers on the earth and under the sky, nonetheless, I find his notions of dwelling are useful as they are at once visible and silenced in the transitional zone that is Sambok Dung.

¹⁸ The Cham are the largest ethnic group in Cambodia. They speak an Austroasiatic language and are associated with the kingdom of Champa, an early state formation in what is today central and southern Vietnam. They have been residents in Cambodia since the early 9th century and their diasporic community grew in waves between the 9th and 14th centuries. Chapter 4 will discuss the Cham in more detail.

¹⁹ Martin Heidegger, "Building Dwelling Thinking," in *Martin Heidegger*, ed. D. F. Krell (London: HarperPerennial/Modern Thought, 2008), p. 350.

The imperial debris that litters both the landscape and the livelihoods of the people who inhabit this space encourages extraction over sparing, and the cultivators and gatherers, whose livelihoods are more tied to the bounty of the planet than the vigor of the market worry that nothing will be spared: the spirits lose power with the removal of trees and the value of money trumps morality in the building of temples and mosques. The freedom promised by democracy and the access to market goods also brings extraction and destruction: palpably visible. The railroad runs across the western edge of the village, a legacy of the colonial era whose legends of progress and prosperity continue to haunt the inhabitants of this region and whose rails continue to move valuable timber out of the region. The contact zone where the forest meets the market highlights the entanglement of dwelling. An early farming resident remarked,

When we first came, we found the wood for our house from these forests. Everyone did. It is never easy to find trees straight and strong enough to hold up a house, back then we looked for many days to find the right wood for the five house-posts. If I had to build my house now, I don't know.

The mountains of the valley are stripped of timber. Single trees stand on grassy mounds that I am told were once full of trees, “as full,” people say, “as Tā `Aū is today.” That Phnam Tā `Aū is still full of trees is because of its *pāramī*. In a recent essay, Anne Guillou suggests that *pāramī* is “a circulating energy present in some trees, stones... and spirits linked to special places.”²⁰ This explanation is closest to what the residents of Sambok Dung tried to explain to me. *Pāramī* is perfected energy, spirit, and power:

Pāramī is everywhere, it is the dhamma that was perfected [mān parisuddhi] in the Buddha, it is the perfection of the dhamma. It is here when we hold the moral precepts [kân sīl] and protects the dhamma in the trees and mountains where we live (Tā Mān, `ācārya Vatt Phnam Tā `Aū).

²⁰ Yvonne Anne Guillou, “An Alternative Memory of the Khmer Rouge Genocide: The Dead of the Mass Graves and the Land Guardian Spirits [*Neak Ta*],” *South East Asia Research* 20 (2) (2012), p. 222.

The pāramī protect Cambodia and protect Buddhism. They are very powerful; we see their energy [bhly, literally light] travel from one place to another. They are here in the mountain, but are everywhere too; always protecting... (Yāy Nāng, village grandmother, 68).

But the first definition of the term *pāramī* is not power or energy, as I initially understood it to be, it is rather, perfection: specifically as it relates to the ten perfections cultivated by the Buddha over many lifetimes that enabled the achievement of nirvana. Another way that *pāramī* is used refers directly to spirits that have been perfected by Buddhism, such a spirit is called a *pāramī*.²¹ Many people told me, “Yes, Phnam Tā `Aū has a lot of *pāramī*” meaning that the mountain itself is the source of great power and also that there are many benevolent spirits that inhabit Phnam Tā `Aū.

I see the flexible and contingent meaning of *pāramī* in the context of Khmer practice to be part of the detritus of empire that litters the dwelling places in Cambodia. The term itself is a late arrival in the Pālī texts and is most often associated with *Mahāyāna* practice and the cultivation of perfections by *bodhisatta*,²² enlightened beings that chose to stay in the cycle of birth and rebirth to assist others in their paths to enlightenment. In the many *Theravāda* recitations I have heard chanted by the monks, the ten perfections cultivated by the Buddha through which he achieved enlightenment are a common part of the liturgy. The ways that the term is used in everyday interactions, however, diverges from the codified and categorized conception implied by the list of ten characteristics necessary for enlightenment.

In this divergence, the interpretation is closer to conceptions found in *Mahāyāna* texts,²³ notably the *prajñāpāramita* literature that focuses on the sixth perfection, *prajñā* wisdom, which causes the realization that “not just the self, but the very dhammas that constitute the person and

²¹ Didier Bertrand, "The Names and Identities of the "Boramey" Spirits Possessing Cambodian Mediums," *Asian Folklore Studies* 60, no. 1 (2001), 31-47.

²² Nalinaksha Dutt, *Buddhist Sects in India* (Calcutta: Firma K. L. Mukhopadhyay, 1970).

²³ I acknowledge, but will not contend with the unstable scholarly delineations of the various Buddhist sects.

the world are intrinsically empty.”²⁴ This emptiness facilitates flow and suggests that the boundaries between things are not boundaries at all, which is exactly what my friends suggested. The salient notion for my purposes is the way that this term, *pāramī*, marks a place in the flow of both intimate and imperial power and ideas. It is a bit like the bridge that Heidegger uses to describe the coming into existence of a local. The bridge, he suggests, “is itself a local... [that] *gathers* the earth as landscape around the stream.”²⁵ The stream is unadorned energy and the landscape, I suggest, consists in the myriad conceptions of power: the mountains and the land, the spirits, and the power of the king and the Buddha. The bridge is the term, *pāramī*. It took me forever to understand how this term was being used because of its polyvalence, but once I did, its bridge-like properties and its gathering effect emerged. Through *pāramī*, the mountains and the land, the spirits, and the power of the king and the Buddha are intimately connected to the lives and livelihoods of rice farming villagers.

The village of Sambok Dung is inhabited by more than rice farmers, however, and the dwellers in this place are connected through more than the tides of empire and the mountain rains. Connected also are religious practices, subsistence activities, buying, selling, and navigating the gifts and restrictions of elites and political leaders. The next section of this chapter will focus on the stories people tell about where they are and described the landscape, the mountains, the spirits and the water. After that, I will describe the histories and trajectories of the humans who came to inhabit this space at the edge of the forest and will focus on the stories people tell about who they are, why they came, and what they are doing.

The People

²⁴ Roger Jackson, ed., *Prajñā (Wisdom)* (New York: Macmillan Reference, USA, 2004), p. 665.

²⁵ Heidegger, *Building Dwelling Thinking*, pp. 355-8, emphasis in original.

There are three definable groups of people within the political boundaries of the village, each with different histories and trajectories that brought them to this place. The soldiers were the first to build and dwell at this place after the Pol Pot years; they came to engage the retreating Khmer Rouge soldiers and the other anti-Vietnamese factions that emerged in the contested zones of power. The soldiers were followed closely by vendors and laborers working along the railroad line taking advantage of the trade in wood and market products. Once the fighting finally slowed in the late 1990s, farmers from neighboring Pursat Province came to claim new rice fields and homesteads and then the SLC brought the bulk of the families to continue turning the forest into a village.

The project of owning land was realized in a variety of ways during the years immediately following Cambodia's emergence from the ultra-modernist project of Democratic Kampuchea,²⁶ in which all land and human productive activities were managed by the state. After the Vietnamese ouster of the Khmer Rouge in January of 1979, people everywhere were on the move, returning to natal villages and looking for surviving family members.²⁷ The interconnected projects of obtaining land and establishing livelihoods have not ceased and neither has the incessant movement these projects entail. The travelogues that describe how people came to the remote region of Sambok Dung to cut fields from the forest or make a living dealing in timber are as varied as the individuals who tell them and the administrative acts that brought them to this place.

²⁶ Although the KR attempted to break from many modern technologies, like pharmaceutical medicines, chemical fertilizers, gas powered water pumps, their agenda of a total control of space using scientific principals and the disciplining of the entire population toward a unified vision of collective life is, I suggest, a very modern proposition. See also, Alexander Laban Hinton, *Why did they Kill?: Cambodia in the Shadow of Genocide* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), pp. 50, 97.

²⁷ David P. Chandler, *A History of Cambodia* (Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 2008), p. 278.

The Vietnamese-backed Cambodian state, the People's Republic of Kampuchea, refrained from forced land collectivization in favor of solidarity groups (*krum sāmaggī*) of 20 or more families.²⁸ These were equally unpopular and administered by the Cambodian officials of the Vietnamese state with varying degrees of adherence to state decrees. According to my interlocutors in Sambok Dung, land allocation practices varied widely from region to region after 1979. In some regions, the solidarity groups were established, but disbanded in the early 80s.²⁹ In others, notably in Battambang and Kompong Thom, there was no collective allocation of land and some families claimed their pre-war holdings.³⁰ From the earliest days of resettlement after the disruptions of Democratic Kampuchea land distribution was contested and contingent.

When the first private property laws were established in 1988, administrators that adhered to the state mandate allotted 0.2 hectare of land for each person in the family. According to my interlocutors, if the land was reasonably fertile it was sufficient for subsistence farming. It was not, however, enough land to accommodate growing families and there was never enough for married children to feed their new families. Land for the next generation was the most cited reason for migration to Sambok Dung. One young woman related her mother's post-Pol Pot story of return to her home village in Kompong Speu:

²⁸ Jean-Christophe Diepart et al., "Rural Communities on the Cambodian Central Plain: A Comparative Analysis Based on Five Communities," *Moussons: Recherche En Sciences Humaines Sur l'Asie Du Sud-Est* 9-10 (2006), 325-354.

²⁹ For a similar disregard for the *krum sāmaggī* see, May Ebiara, "'Beyond Suffering': The Recent History of a Cambodian Village," in *The Challenge of Reform in Indochina*, ed. Börje Ljunggren (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Institute for International Development, Harvard University: Distributed by Harvard University Press, 1993), pp. 160.

³⁰ The practices of post-war rural land allocation varied widely and were largely at the discretion of the village head or the commune chief. For more on land tenure practices in Cambodia, see Sokbunthoeun So, "The Politics and Practice of Land Registration at the Grassroots," in *Cambodia's Economic Transformation*, eds. Caroline Hughes and Kheang Un (Copenhagen: Nias Press, 2011); Lisa J. Arensen, "Making the Srok: Resettling a Mined Landscape in Northwest Cambodia," The University of Edinburgh; Cănc Suphal, *Land Transactions in Cambodia: An Analysis of Transfers and Transaction Records*, ed. Sarthi Acharya (Phnom Penh: Cambodia Development Resource Institute; Vidyāsthān Paṇṭuḥ Paṇṭāl nīn Srāvjrāv ṭoempī Qabhivaddhn Kambujā, 2002), p. 46.

After that bastard Pot fell,³¹ she returned to her home village and found that her brother-in law had claimed all her land. She protested to the village head, but he was new and he didn't recognize her. None of the other villagers would stand up to my uncle. The other man, who was village head when she lived here, had died already and there was no one who would help her. She had no place to go then... She went to her birthplace then, but by the time she arrived there was nothing left... she found an aunt who took her in, but she never had any land. I was a baby then and she had to raise me with nothing. She had no land and I had none either, that's why we came here. My husband's brother found this place and he told us to come, he said there was land here and so I came here with my family. Life is still hard, but now we can grow rice...

This was a common story of early appropriation and the problems associated with locally administered land laws. People's claims to land remain informally negotiated,³² but new measurement and titling initiatives currently underway will change that in ways that are yet unclear.³³ Regular citizens have a tenuous hold on land ownership, but the military maintains strong claims on the land in this region and the second most cited reason for settling in Sambok Dung was soldering.

The fighting began to slow in the late 1990s and at that time large swaths of land were claimed by and awarded to soldiers throughout the western regions of the country.³⁴ Most of the soldiers and their families who currently inhabit the village of Sambok Dung fought for the State of Cambodia and came to the region in the early 1980s. They tell of the never-ending skirmishes with warring factions and constant movement up and down the towns that dot the railroad line

³¹ This is my own translation of the derogatory term most often used to refer to Pol Pot. People say *`ās Pot*. The tag *`ās* in front of a name signifies distaste and derision. It is often used in front of the names of little boys in a joking way. The woman I lived with called her grandson *`ās Yute*, I would translate this as 'that rascal *Yute*'. It is also used as a tag for unpopular political leaders. For example, the popular anti-government electronic media often calls Prime Minister Hun Sen *`ās Sen*. This I translate, 'that bastard Sen'.

³² So, *The Politics and Practice of Land Registration at the Grassroots*.

³³ Research conducted in January 2014 makes this more clear and will be included in the book manuscript.

³⁴ Arensen, *Making the Srok: Resettling a Mined Landscape in Northwest Cambodia*; Sovannarith So et al., *Social Assessment of Land in Cambodia: A Field Study*, ed. Sū Suvannāridhi. (Phnom Penh, Cambodia: Cambodia Development Resource Institute, Vidyāsthān Paṇṭuaḥ Paṇṭāl niṅ Srāvjrāv Toempī Qabhivaḍḍhaṅ Kambujā, 2001), p. 92; Cānc Suphal, *Land Tenure in Cambodia: A Data Update*, eds. Tep Saravy and Sarthi Acharya. (Phnom Penh: Cambodia Development Resource Institute, 2001), p. 66.

from Phnom Penh to Battambang.³⁵ These men were both conscripts and volunteers, but many that remain in Sambok Dung began their military movement in Kompong Speu, where the army still has large land holdings and military training facilities.³⁶ Each soldiering family currently in Sambok Dung had different experiences and trajectories that brought them here, but they now live primarily along the railroad tracks. The two stories that follow provide some context and contrast. The first is from a man now in his early 50s who continues to struggle on a small plot of land in the village.

They came to my village and put up a sign; I couldn't read it and was afraid to ask [about it]. A few days later they came to my house and forced me to go fight in the army. Not the Khmer Rouge, the state army. I learned later what the sign said. It said we could volunteer to help the government, but I couldn't read so they forced me to be a soldier. We were in Kompong Speu for ten days of training then they sent me to Si Siphon.³⁷ There was constant fighting there. It never stopped... I shot so many people... we were in the forest and always the enemy would attack... we couldn't sleep, we never rested... I would shoot with one hand and eat with the other... When I came back to the base I met my wife. We stayed there for two years and then came here together with our first child... That was in 1996. There was still fighting, but here it was less. We moved three times here... when the war ended they forced me out of the army and I had nothing, we bought this land from my sergeant, tā Rein and now we have some rice and some sugar palm trees... it's a hard life for us. There is never enough... (tā Jen, age 50)

This next story is from the wife of the land-selling soldier named above. The soldiers were all named as sellers of land in this region, along with the village heads. It is difficult to know how

³⁵ There were actually a number of anti-Vietnamese factions fighting alongside, against, and otherwise comingled with Khmer Rouge forces during the years of Vietnamese control of the government. There is a large body of literature on this period. One could begin with: David P. Chandler, *A History of Cambodia* (Boulder; North Sydney, NSW, Australia: Westview Press; Allen & Unwin, 1992); David P. Chandler, Ben Kiernan and Anthony Barnett, *Revolution and its Aftermath in Kampuchea: Eight Essays* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Southeast Asia Studies, 1983); Stephen R. Heder, "The Resumption of Armed Struggle by the Party of Democratic Kampuchea: Evidence from the Army of Democratic Kampuchea 'Self-Demobilizers'", in *Propaganda, Politics, and Violence in Cambodia: Democratic Transition Under United Nations Peace-Keeping*, eds. Stephen R. Heder and Judy Ledgerwood (Armonk, N.Y.: M.E. Sharpe, 1996); Ben Kiernan and Caroline Hughes, *Conflict and Change in Cambodia* (London; New York: Routledge, 2007); Margaret Slocomb, *The People's Republic of Kampuchea, 1979-1989: The Revolution After Pol Pot* (Chiang Mai, Thailand: Silkworm Books, 2003); Serge Thion, *Watching Cambodia: Ten Paths to Enter the Cambodian Tangle* (Bangkok: White Lotus, 1993).

³⁶ So et al., *Social Assessment of Land in Cambodia: A Field Study*, 92

³⁷ In Banteay Meanchey province, the northern most stop on the railroad line at the time.

much land he personally sold, but he is one of the higher ranking soldiers and has sizable personal land holdings in the village:

My mother arranged the marriage in 1984, I was 16. We were in Kompong Thom. People were still afraid of war then and my mother wanted me to be safe, so I married him. We left home the next year for Phnom Penh so he could train as a soldier. We had our first child then. We lived in the barracks in Kompong Speu and had one more baby then we came here in 1987... Back then, when we first got here there was nothing but forest, fighting [pause] ... and soldiers. We lived in the barracks then, too... We were further south then, in Thŷk Jeñ... there was a lot of fighting, but my husband was mostly in the area. We stayed for three years like this, maybe more. Later, when he wasn't fighting so much we moved to Kbāl. My sister came then, she brought her two kids and her husband to cut wood. That was after the election, maybe 93 or 94. It was better with my sister here... and then we got land in 2000, the government gave land to soldiers so we could have a life. Then we came to build the house. They gave us village land, 30x100, but we grabbed more. We have 150x100 now [1.5 hectares]. There was nothing but forest here then. Forest, soldiers, and wild pigs... we hired people to clear the land for us. His soldier's salary was 5 m'ŷn month [about \$125 USD] now he is a gendarme and he makes 15 m'ŷn [about \$375 USD]. It's easier now, yes. But things are still hard out here in the countryside [nau janapad]. People get sick and they die, the forest makes people sick and they die.

Stories of death from forest borne illnesses, accidents, and the plight of persistent poverty far outweigh traumatic stories from the Khmer Rouge years among residents of Sambok Dung.

People certainly experienced loss and hardship during the failed ultra-modernist regime of the Khmer Rouge, but the subsequent war was hard, village life is hard, cutting fields from the forest is hard, losing land is hard, and working for the plantations is hard. For many families, the current era is harder than the ones that came before largely because of the palpably visible effects of what money can buy for those few who have it. The woman's story above offers a poignant critique on the power of money, things are easier for her with money but still not so easy; and the road she traveled with the soldiers who can now claim and clear land for their families offers perhaps too much of the everything she is accused of having.

The search and desire for land is a softly rumbling undercurrent through the stories of the migrants who attempt to make space for themselves in this rugged and unstable place. The soldiers came along the hard tracks of the railroad and a contingent of internal migrants followed, making a living from the wood trade that burgeoned alongside the conflict and especially in the years of peace and development that followed.³⁸ This was the third most cited reason people settled here: they came looking for wages. A story from Prey Veng presents a common migrant labor strategy that took advantage of the wood trade in response to insufficient land holdings:

When we got back to the village, we were three people [after Pol Pot]. Our two sons died during the era of that bastard Pot and only our daughter remained. We shared land with the others in the beginning; at that time we had enough and people worked together. Then they split the land and we received .8 hectares of land because we had another child and there were four of us. At first it was enough, but when we had two more children there was no more land and sometimes we didn't have enough. When our daughter married we gave her that land and left her youngest brother with her. We went with our two sons to look for work so we could buy more land. We went to Phnom Penh and I worked as a bicycle taxi driver, then my son came here to work loading wood onto the train. He made money and said there was land here, so we came here. Further south at first, then we moved here- we just followed the saws.³⁹ Now we bought some land here and our youngest son will come here. We have this village land and one hectare of rice field in the forest... No, we don't grow rice, it's forest land [dē brai].

Many who came here as laborers are displaced rice farmers looking for a way back to the land. In the case of the man's story above they are not yet farming their land, clearing forest land for cultivation is no small procedure and very few families with only 'family power' get their land under cultivation. If there is money to rent labor and rent machines, then much land comes under production. Also, if the primary means of subsistence involves getting that land cleared, it gets

³⁸ Philippe Le Billon, "Logging in Muddy Waters: The Politics of Forest Exploitation in Cambodia," in *Conflict and Change in Cambodia*, eds. Ben Kiernan and Caroline Hughes (London; New York: Routledge, 2007).

³⁹ "Following the saws" was a common way to describe the migrant labor experiences along the railroad tracks. The saws move according to available timber.

done with family power. But if wage subsistence is available, the dream of land remains but is often only realized in a claim to the forest.

Claims to the forest were made by the soldiers, but also by a few Cham families from neighboring Pursat, who returned to pre-war homesteads in the area. The Cham came in two groups; the first rice farming families trickled in when the fighting slowed in the region in the late 1990s. They came from neighboring Pursat province engaging in the time honored response to land pressure common in Cambodia and throughout mainland Southeast Asia:⁴⁰ they moved into less populated areas and cleared new ground for farming and homesteading. These families live in what is referred to as the 'Old Village' of Sambok Dung. This is the story of one Cham grandmother who returned at the end of the war:

I was born on this land. My parents came here during the Sangkum period because there was not enough land in Pursat. They cut these fields and planted these mango trees. This is my land, but when we returned after `ās Pot it was too dangerous to live here and we were forced to take land in Pursat... It was too far away from people and there was still too much fighting here. But, when the war stopped, I brought my grandsons here and we cleared the land again. My sons built this house for me with wood from the forest and we used our ox cart to gather more wood to sell. This helped us to have enough; there was nothing but forest here at that time and we could sell a lot of wood without going too far. Now, my grandsons travel two sometimes three weeks into the mountains to gather enough to sell. We are poor, but we have enough. It is harder for others. Each Maulid⁴¹ we have enough to call our neighbors to come and we share our rice with them.

The migrants from neighboring Pursat are well established with family ties in the neighboring village. The stories from Cham in the 'new village' offer a different rhythm to the land-song of Sambok Dung. They began to arrive in 2004 and most of them come from the fishing villages along the Tonle Sāp that spread from the northern edges of Phnom Penh into Pursat province.

They came for the land, but the fields surrounding the new village were already claimed by 2004

⁴⁰ Thion, *Watching Cambodia: Ten Paths to Enter the Cambodian Tangle*; James C. Scott, *The Art of Not being Governed: An Anarchist History of Upland Southeast Asia* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009).

⁴¹ The birthday of Mohammad, during which time people who can, often make alms offerings in their community.

and the available non-village plots for these families were on high ground (*dī khbās*): unsuitable for rice farming. I offer here three short stories from the new village, which as a mosaic, gives voice to their movements.

The Buddhists have all the land. It has always been this way. We Cham have the water, but we have no land; they are the rich ones and we Cham are always poor. We came here to get some land, the imam told us about the free land here and we all left the river to build houses and plant orchards. I have my house, but my orchard is too far away...

Before we came here, we lived on our boat: the three children, my wife and myself. My wife's brother came here and he told us there was land, so we came. There was never any land for us, we are fishing people. My parents had a house before Pol Pot, but just a house. There was no land; and in the dry season, we would take our boat and go to the Tonle Sap Lake for those months. Just like now. In the dry season I take my sons and we take our boat to the lake. We are happy on the boat: kluck, kluck, kluck... we are always moving. In the rainy season here we work for them [s'ī jhnual ge], we work in their rice fields and we repair our [fishing] nets...

I met my husband on the road. After Pol Pot I was alone. All my family was gone and I was walking alone back to the river. At that time things were very dangerous; there were soldiers on the road and they told us to wait in Battambang until things were safe. There were many Cham there, we were all together and when it was safe, we walked all together. I met my husband then and we walked together on the road away from there. We went to his birthplace first, even though we were both orphans we didn't know where else to go. I came from Chroy Changvar [the peninsular formation at the juncture of the Mekong and Sap rivers north of Phnom Penh], but we stopped in Kampong Chhnang first. When we arrived, all the land along the river was taken... there was no place for us... we just kept walking... We worked for them and rented a room from them... we just kept moving and looking for work... Then we heard about the land here, so we brought our children to come here and try to live on the land. I learned to do rice in Pol Pot, but we can't grow rice here....

There are many Cham rice farmers in Cambodia: in Kampong Cham, Kampong Thom, Kampong Chhnang, Pursat and Battambang. Cham migration and history in Cambodia will be discussed more fully in chapter 4. Here, I want to present the variety of experiences and histories of the people who come to live at the edge of the mountains in Sambok Dung.

There are a few themes that emerged from my field notes and I have tried to represent them here: constant movement, hardship, and displacement since Pol Pot; shifting subsistence strategies, contingent contracts and multiple authorities, dissipation and reunification of families, war, land, and the experience of moving into the forest. I want explicitly point to the absence and presence of land in these stories of movement, to the absence and presence of family, to practices of subsistence, and to the multi-fold work of the forest as a place of danger and death, as a locus of subsistence, and as a wild, unpredictable place separate from but deeply connected to the village. Some of these ideas come out more fully in subsequent chapters, but these are recurring parts of the story that villagers in Sambok Dung tell about themselves. What I want to bring out through the course of the stories I have to tell are the various and unstable environments of power in and through which sociality and stories emerge in this interstitial zone of rural Cambodia.

Theoretical Interlude

The recurring parts of this story, the “proliferating metaphors” that Michel de Certeau invokes in his essay, *Spatial Stories*, organize places of habitation “through the displacements they ‘describe’”.⁴²(Certeau 1984) Stories act upon space as much as the walkers and the water, each tracing their respective trajectories. The forest that is filled through stories with dangerous and unpredictable spirits creates a particular place that requires certain types of activities,⁴³ the forest as exploitable resource story gives rise to a tangibly different kind of place and different types of

⁴²Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), p. 116.

⁴³ Many in the village rarely go into the forest, but when they do they watch their step, mind their words, and often carry incense sticks and sugar drops as offerings to the spirits.

forest activities,⁴⁴ and the forest as a resource in need of human protection gives rise to yet other types of activities.⁴⁵

Throughout the chapters that follow, I will present and think through the descriptions that people give to things and activities, but also, in de Certeau's sense, will think through the limits and transgressions borne via things and activities thus described. The displacements people recounted to me involved both those that result from the state: war, private ownership of land, religion, market activities, social hierarchies; and those that go on with or without a state: subsistence, land use, families, health, death, and spirits. What I want to pull out through the following pages is the way that these stories "impose order" and "found space"⁴⁶ and of what that ordered space consists, but I want also to attend to the contact zones of the stories and how they mark frontiers and establish borders "only by saying what crosses it".⁴⁷

In order to describe the frontiers and crossings of the interstitial space called Sambok Dung, I was drawn to mapping technologies in my early conceptions of the project. The project changed shape so dramatically during my time in the field that I left behind many of my original mapmaking plans, but I was drawn back to the map by my scholarly interlocutors who wanted to 'see' what I was attempting to describe. The making of maps has proven an interesting exercise, they are imperfect representations that attempt to illustrate the demarcations people presented to me through their stories and actions; they also represent the particular stories I choose to tell and as such are deeply implicated in the work of making history and attempting to "found space" by

⁴⁴ For a provocative discussion of how the social status of trees in the forests of Borneo changed from that of revered ancestors to the status of dead wood with monetary worth, see Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing, *Friction: An Ethnography of Global Connection* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2005), pp. 28-54.

⁴⁵ For an intricate story of forest management and conservation that attends to the extractive and protective logics of state and local institutions see, K. Sivaramakrishnan, *Modern Forests: Statemaking and Environmental Change in Colonial Eastern India* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1999).

⁴⁶ Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, pp. 119, 123.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 127.

my own authorizing displacements. I make every effort to stick to the stories people told me and to the experiences I had, but admit a bit of orientalism as my experiences in the contact zone of empire cause me to reflect upon my own white middle-class cosmologies. The best I can do with this exercise in knowledge production is to attempt reflexivity and to actively engage with the reciprocal nature of the encounter. I have been changed by my time in Sambok Dung just as my friends and acquaintances that live there were changed by my appearance in their lives. My only hope is that the readers of this story will also be changed by this act of making history.

History making informed my maps and my stories, which contributes to the shape of the space in Sambok Dung. But, this now-village space was shaped by more than ideation and history. The forest trees, wild pigs, spirits, and snakes have been shaping these forests for generations, when the people come they bring with them buffalo, fruit trees, chickens, and rice. The interactions of the inhabitants in this geographic space show how, as Tim Ingold suggests, “living beings of all kinds, in what they do, constitute each other’s conditions of existence.”⁴⁸ Ingold makes a strong point against the notion convincingly established by Marx and Engels that the modes of production establish the “nature of individuals,”⁴⁹ and further that the act of production is driven by the ‘idea’ of the product.

Marx suggested that by “awakening them from the dead,” living labor brings finished products into their already idealized state.⁵⁰ I want to first jettison the idea that the raw materials of production are in any way dead: all matter contains energy; and I do not contend that the activities of production play no part in the business of making people or that ideas do not direct productive activity and become productive themselves, exactly as Marx and Engels suggest. I

⁴⁸ Ingold, *Being Alive: Essays on Movement, Knowledge and Description*, p. 8

⁴⁹ Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The German Ideology, Part I*, trans. C. J. Arthur (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1970), p. 42.

⁵⁰ Karl Marx, *Capital, Volume One: A Critique of Political Economy* (New York: Vintage Books, 1867 [1977]), pp. 289-93.

follow Ingold's intervention, however and suggest that *attention*, which is embroiled with, but deeper than production and ideation, is the agentive force in the mutually constituting movement of existence. The "intentionality not of an isolated mind, of the cogitating subject confronting an exterior world of things, but rather that of a being wholly immersed in the relational nexus of its instrumental 'coping' in the world."⁵¹

Making the move away from idea driven production allows a shift in thinking. Human activity can be decentered a bit and the attentive movements of other entities, like rain, spirits, buffalo, and scorpions can become visible as actors and agents. I want to be cautious of the foibles inherent in attempts to 'represent' the land, wind, and water that render it visible only as the stable and constant background to human activities.⁵² Neither can I claim a voice for nature or for non-human actors, as Donna Haraway suggestively attempts.⁵³ But by decentering the human and bringing in other actors, by thinking about the mutually constitutive and constantly shifting ways that habitation takes place, my ethnographic project opens to the unstable environments of power that are incorporated in the field of human sociality in Sambok Dung.⁵⁴

Despite Ingold's appropriate intervention into Marx and Engels' ideas about the relationship between production, ideas, and subject making, there remains a good deal of productive activity and building projects that respond to idealized visions of how inhabited life is

⁵¹ Tim Ingold, *The Perception of the Environment: Essays on Livelihood, Dwelling & Skill* (London; New York: Routledge, 2000), p. 415. See also, Eduardo Kohn, *How Forests Think: Toward an Anthropology Beyond the Human*, 2013), pp. 23-5, 153-88. on the notion of intentionality, relational immersion, and the constitution of subjects and worlds.

⁵² Doreen Massey, "Landscape as a Provocation," *Journal of Material Culture* 11, no. 1-2 (2006); Steve Hinchliffe, "'Inhabiting' - Landscapes and Natures," in *Handbook of Cultural Geography*, eds. Kay Anderson and others (London; Thousand Oaks, Calif.: Sage, 2003).

⁵³ Donna Jeanne Haraway, *When Species Meet* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008).

⁵⁴ I quite consciously push against an enlightened sensibility that clings to the notion that we humans can detect the agentive capacity of other forms of existence, be they dolphins or rocks. The idea that the human animal has the monopoly on intentional action is a belief, improvable by a scientific method that compares other species to humans and finds them lacking. The 'science' that addresses other-than-human cognition could be productively compared to early colonial endeavors to 'prove' the inferiority of other-than-European humans. I am exploring productive ways of challenging this belief.

supposed to look. There is something about stories that fold productive activities into their enactment. The stories in the next section are associated with building and with dwelling, and are told and enacted by the people who live here. I see the built environment in Sambok Dung as a contact zone of stories that describe how the world is and should be in relation to the flows of energy that come from the “creative potential of a world-in-formation”⁵⁵ and also in relation to narratives of empire, history, and capitalist production. “New social relationships call for new space,” suggests Lefebvre, and “‘composition’ is informed by ideologies.”⁵⁶ In the contact zone of Sambok Dung, the stories of state emerge as organizing forces in the built environment.

Marx and Engels, I suggest, were too deterministic in their assessment of the relationship between production and personhood: there are many factors beyond the “material conditions determining their production” that conspire and influence individuals and communities.⁵⁷ Nonetheless, there are some powerful forces at work in the production of space that Marx and Engels understood. One is the march of history that influences typical activities of subsistence and sociality, and make home building, markets and trade, and rice farming seem like the goal and the objective of histories. There is also a productive tension that arises with the active role of space in existing modes of production: walking makes a trail, which makes a river when it rains; cutting trees brings sunshine to the understory and calls a new species into domination.

Lefebvre stretches the materialist framework of Marx and Engels to highlight the zones of accommodation that emerge with the movements of bodies and energies in space, and he grounds the phenomenological perspectives of Ingold, DeCerteau, and Heidegger by attending to the ways that zones of accommodation also become zones of history and of domination.⁵⁸ The

⁵⁵ Tim Ingold, “Earth, Sky, Wind, and Weather,” *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 13 (2007), p. S31.

⁵⁶ Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, p. 56, 159.

⁵⁷ Marx and Engels, *The German Ideology, Part I*, p. 42.

⁵⁸ Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, p. 11.

first section of this chapter introduced the mountains in a way that attempted to acknowledge the agentive power that moves because of them and also the stories that describe that power within human sociality. The middle section moved through stories with the current human inhabitants of Sambok Dung from wherever they were before to the homes where we sat together in conversation. This next and final section of the chapter will describe the built environment and the spatial organization of the village and will draw some lines between this spatiality and the stories and inhabitants described already.

The Built Environment

The mountains here used to hide armies and have always housed spirits, they provide wood and malaria, and they mark the boundaries of the controlled world for many villagers. In this village, recently cut from the forest, the boundary between the forest and the village is marked more by discourse than by the built environment, as the built world of the village fades into the forest (see map 2). This section attends to the boundaries created by religious, governmental, and economic practices as they manifest in the built environment in Sambok Dung: the village presents four distinct neighborhoods three sit along the three main roads; on one live the soldiers and wood dealers, on another live Cham rice farmers, woodcutters, and fishermen, and on the third live Khmer rice farmers; the fourth spreads into the forest beyond the rails. Lefebvre posits the natural environment as the “original model of the social process” that has no “reality” without the energy deployed within it.⁵⁹ I question Lefebvre’s invocation of ‘reality’, but stay with him as opens the obvious structures of the built human environment to the conversation with the rivers and hills, plants and animals in this space. To this interchange, I also add the locally and imperially conceived stories that ‘impose order’ on the production of space.

⁵⁹ Ibid., pp. 30, 13.

The only hard route within 30 km of Sambok Dung is the railroad, which leads out of the village; it runs south-east to north-west connecting the village to the cities south and north, Phnom Penh and Battambang respectively, and to the small local markets north and south. Next to the railroad, a dirt road runs intermittently all along its course. Where it goes through Sambok Dung it is both rail and dirt road, and while it leads to the market and the city, it is not at the center of the village. It is however, the site of village administration: the small school, the home of the police representative, and the village head are all in this area. This is also the main cite of commerce in the village and between the main dirt track and the railroad tracks live the soldiers, the police, and the wood laborers.

This is state land and none have title to their holdings. Consequently, the houses are densely packed together. The two other roads of the village, almost a full kilometer apart coming off the trunk road, each lead north to places of worship, one Buddhist and one Cham, and both slip into winding paths as the houses give way to forest and fields (see maps 2 and 3). Farmers and fishermen live on these roads. The compounds are large, a minimum of 30 meters wide; some point economically inward and are crowded with fruit trees and vegetable gardens, various animal huts and corrals; others point economically outward, with no gardens or animals, or minimal fruit trees and husbandry to supplement the primary incomes of fishing or wood trading (see map 4). To the south of the rails are a series of trails and cart roads that harbor clusters of homes where some families are engaged in making charcoal, some are planting gardens and growing rice, and others cutting trees or planking wood at the portable saw mills deeper in the forest. There are in Sambok Dung four distinct neighborhoods, self-segregated and structurally produced by the forces of economic, religious, and government initiatives.

The state land between the railroad and the main dirt track is managed by the high-ranking soldiers, who sell small cleared plots to other soldiers and to the wood and charcoal producers. The houses are densely packed together and sit low to the ground, with slat wooden walls and zinc roofing. There are very few gardens or huts for animal husbandry: subsistence comes not from planting the land but from working the wood, small vending, or drawing a soldier's salary. Along the railroad are piles of wood planks, bags of charcoal, and occasional tree trunks awaiting transport. Most of the houses face the tracks and there is one small storefront selling durables and beer that serves the local rail and foot traffic. Along the dirt-roadside of these plots each home has a small spirit house facing it from the yard, raised on a post about a meter from the ground (Photo 1a); this is where offerings are made to the *mcâs dÿk mcâs tî* (*maja tuk maja day*), who will be properly introduced in chapter three. Only one of the families here farms rice, but the fields of their neighbors, both Cham and Khmer, are here and there amid the remnants of the forest: rice land that spreads in patches and fills in niches between the flows of water, the stands of hard trees, the termite mounds, the houses, and the roads of this village.

Beyond the railroad toward the mountains there are no roads, only trails winding around and across each other in the direction of the mountains. Everyone that goes into the deep forest uses these trails, but not all who live out here go into the forest. The trails wind through the low trees and tall grasses that dominate the landscape; they pass by large land holdings in which urban dwellers find again their health through the hard work of planting and the clean air of the countryside; they pass by small clutches of homes built low to the ground with zinc roofs, no gardens or chickens or buffalo; they pass by other homes built high off the ground on concrete pilings with tile roofs. There are rice farmers, whose clusters of low-built homes, sometimes three to a plot, are dense with vegetables, young fruit trees, chicken huts, and buffalo corals.

Next to these farming homes, rice fields interrupt the foliage beyond the homestead. The trails of the forest village also pass by homes grouped around charcoal kilns and around a wood saw, where huge rosewood logs wait in a pile to be cut according to specification; and they pass under a thicket where an *`anak tā* resides at the base of the only tall tree remaining in this low, scrub forest.

The people living out here are considered to be in ‘the forest’; despite their inclusion in the village as an administrative unit, the homes on the other side of the tracks were not considered by all to be part of the village. “*You can’t go see them,*” I was told by the family I stayed with, “*they live way out in the forest.*” The families who live on the other side of the tracks can be new residents who came here looking for cheap rice land and found it only far from the road, some are residents whose fortunes continue to fail and who moved here after selling larger plots of land closer in, some are involved in the wood trade and find the anonymity of this region conducive to their operations. One woman spoke of the remoteness of her location with sarcastic humor, “*It’s not just anyone who can live out here in the forest where the market and the school are far away. My children are strong: they walk an hour to school and they work when they get home.*” She told me she rarely went to the market and when I questioned how she got her food, she laughed out loud at my ignorance. “*Out there, teacher,*”⁶⁰ she said, motioning with her head toward the forest. “*There’s a stream behind those trees and that forest is full of food! Out here, we don’t need a market; we don’t want them in the village looking at us anyway!*” Not everyone who lived in ‘the forest’ had the same jocular response to living so far away from ‘the village’ and another woman remarked, gesturing to her spacious home, “*we have money, but eat only fish and grass* [mān luy hūp tae trī ning smau].

⁶⁰ During my stay in the village, at the request of parents, I taught basic English after school. I came to be known by all in the village as *`anak grū*, pronounced neak kru, meaning teacher.

The neighborhoods in the forest are like small clearings in the trees, but as the trails wind southward to cross again the tracks the forest slowly and intermittently gives way to rice fields. Here, there is very little scrub forest left and the only space not producing rice or kitchen gardens is deep water and tangled clumps of trees. All of the rice fields here are Cham. We cross the trunk road and pass under the sign that demarcates Cham space where wide rice fields line both sides of the road and few small houses with mature fruit trees sit 100 meters down at the bend of the road and the edge of the rice (Photo 1b). Beyond them Cham houses line up, each on a plot 30 meters wide and 100 meters long. Many have mature trees; these are the old plots, homesteads cleared over 40 years ago then abandoned during the forced migration of 1975. The trees remain, and those who survived the DK years and the ensuing wars returned here in the late 1990s to re-clear the rice fields and build homes beneath towering mango, cashew, jackfruit and papaya trees.

The social land concession was strictly distributed in this neighborhood even though the distribution of space favors certain families: those who arrived early claimed the protected areas under the canopy of fruit trees and later arrivals dug new space for themselves from the scrubby trees and brush. The homes here are all close to the road and most are no more than a meter from the ground with slat wood walls and tin roofs, save the home of the former village head which is raised two meters on wooden posts with painted wood walls and a tile roof. This former village head was proud of his strict adherence to the standards of land allocation and used it as an example of how corrupt his Khmer counterparts were. He said, *"They just gave land to anyone who had money to spend. Over there, the poor didn't get any good land. Here I gave land to whomever came first. I never took money from them."* His own holding is substantially larger than the others, but this, he said was because he was here first. Most of the Cham homes in the

Old village have vegetable gardens behind them and the rice fields stretch beyond these and fill the space that separates the Cham and Khmer neighborhoods to the north and the Old and New Villages to the south. The southern land is higher and does not support wet rice cultivation. “*We don’t grow rice. We came late,*” one young father said. “*All the rice land was gone and so we try to grow orchards.*” In the New Village, young fruit trees grow in grassy spaces beyond the rice, there are small gardens close to the houses, and a few chickens in the compounds.

Farming the high ground is a hard road to subsistence and the skeletal remains of a few failed homesteads dot the road in the new village and testify to the struggle. The people who settled the New Village are from the river and most families maintain their boats and their fishing lifestyle. Planting and harvesting for their rice growing neighbors also contributes to family economies, as does occasional work for the *Chinese Company*. These plantations, owned and operated by Chinese firms, pay one month at a time and people with unstable livelihoods from all over the region use this employment to supplement the year’s cycle of expenses. The multi-layered subsistence strategies of the New Village are juxtaposed in Pūmi Tā Porn where there are also a few empty homes.

These are not failed homesteads however; they are second homes with absentee owners whose rice fields and orchards are tended by tenant farmers. The configuration of space along the Buddhist road, in Pūmi Tā Porn, is different in many ways from the Old Village and the New Village (map 3). The road to the Buddhist temple is considerably longer than the road to the Cham mosque, 4.6 and 1.3 kilometers respectively, and the temple road connects to the next village, while the road through the Old Village gives way to trails that wind to the New Village and to Phnaṃ Tā `Aū. In the old village, all space along the road is occupied by homes in regular formation, in Picjoo and Pūmi Tā Porn, large tracts remain unmolested. Even though

undeveloped, all the land along this long road has an owner: some plots have fences that attest to ownership, but not all, and some plots have mango orchards with no house. The wealthier migrants to these neighborhoods could buy two adjoining lots, something not accommodated in the Cham neighborhoods, so the roadside is dotted with orchards and rice fields next to tall homes with kitchen gardens, buffalo corrals, and outbuildings for chickens. Next to these are plots accommodating three homes and four generations in their 30x100 meter plots.

The people who live along the temple road are primarily rice farmers and a family's economic status is marked by the height of their houses from the ground. From our seat under the tree in her yard, one woman said, "*I have no place to sit and chat [`angguay leng]. We are poor and can't sit under the house like they do. My house is on the ground [nau loe tī] but the old tree gives us shade and breeze. One day, we'll build a house high from the ground.*" Homes raised from the ground are important and the transition from low homes that are easy to put up and pull down to homes built off the ground with solid foundations has been documented in other places transitioning into human habitation.⁶¹

The homes of occasional urban dwellers are concrete two-story structures with red tile roofs set on a concrete base on the ground, defying the need for shade and breeze. The home of the village head and the wealthy wood dealers are wooden structures lifted three meters from the

⁶¹ May Ebihara did fieldwork in a small village south of Phnom Penh in 1959/60 and returned again in 1989. Judy Ledgerwood and Ebihara visited this same village in 1997 and Ledgerwood again in 2010. Both researchers note the ways that home construction reflects the health and prosperity of individuals and community in this village. Also Lisa Arensen, in a recent dissertation from the northwestern forests of Banteay Mienchey, encounters people with the same stories of how the village should look and how houses raised from the ground marked not only wealth, but a distinctly appropriate village home. See, May Mayko Ebihara, "Svay, a Khmer Village in Cambodia" Columbia University; May Ebihara, "Memories of the Pol Pot Era in a Cambodian Village," in *Cambodia Emerges from the Past: Eight Essays*, ed. Judy Ledgerwood (DeKalb, IL: Southeast Asia Publications, Center for Southeast Asian Studies, Northern Illinois University, 2002); Judy L. Ledgerwood, "A Tale of Two Temples: Communities and their Wats," in *Anthropology and Community in Cambodia: Reflections on the Work of May Ebihara*, ed. John A. Marston (Caulfield: Monash University Press, 2011); Arensen L.J., "Displacement, Diminishment, and Ongoing Presence: The State of Local Cosmologies in Northwest Cambodia in the Aftermath of War," *Asian Ethnology* 71, no. 2 (2012), 159-178.

ground on concrete pillars. The other homes up and down the lane vary in height: some are high enough to allow dwelling under the house and others are low to the ground with walls of either grass or wood and roofs of both zinc and thatch. Most homes are along the main roads, but some families do not have 'village land' and have erected small homes in their rice fields. While rice farming is the primary mode of subsistence and many are wealthy enough to have both rice paddy and fruit orchards, there are also numerous sugar palm trees in the area and some families complement their rice farming by gathering sugar palm nectar to make into juice, palm wine, and palm sugar. There are families that have no rice land, have not cleared their rice land, or have no draft animals, and these families subsist by gathering in the forests and fields, by harvesting and planting for their landed neighbors, by working for the *Chinese Company*, and sometimes by tending the buffalo.

Buffalo and humans regularly move together along the roads and through the fields and forests. The buffalo that haul wood work all year: they pull carts into the forest and return two weeks later laden with logs. Those who work in the fields, labor only in the rainy season: hauling carts and plows to the fields in the morning and back in the evening. When not working, they can be found wallowing in the water holes at various times during the day or walking along the trails of the village grazing under the watchful eye of their attendant, who keeps them out of the rice fields and the orchards. In earlier years, it was the children who tended the buffalo, but as more children are expected to attend school, the buffalo walk the trails with grandfathers, adolescents, and other neighbors who help for a small fee.

At the eastern end of the temple road far from the administration center is the Buddhist temple and Phnaṃ Tā `Aū. The Cham mosque also sits far from administrative power in the village. The tension between the power activated by the Cambodian state and the modes of

authority enacted by religious organizations will be explored in chapters three and four. What I want to show here, by describing the built environments of the distinct neighborhoods in Sambok Dung, is the way that the spatial organization of the village is produced by administrative brokers of state power who make decisions about land allocation, and by religious beliefs and affiliations that become entangled in administrative actions and decisions, and by subsistence strategies and land profiteering.

This spatial organization comes not just from national projects of war and concession, local administration, modes of production, or religious affiliation, however, it also results from the movement of people in search of basic subsistence land and following families, from the access that early or wealthy migrants have to the area's resources, and from the resources already available in conjunction with the skills and habits of the inhabitants that come to access them. The early settlers in the Old Village and around Phnam Tā `Aū claimed lowland plots with mature fruit trees along the water flow, the soldiers claimed land by the railroad attached to the markets, the later residents and absentee owners along the temple road claimed as much land as administrators and money allowed, and those with experience climbing the sugar palm chose this region over others.

Everyone in Sambok Dung considers themselves poor, although my descriptions should make clear that such poverty is relative. Nonetheless, the height of one's home, whether it is wood, thatch, or concrete, and the absence and presence of fruit trees, draft animals, and machines in that domestic space inform the stories that people tell about themselves and others and also informs the building projects in which they engage. In a different way, the position of the homestead in the built environment of 'the village' as opposed to the still wild spaces of 'the

forest' embeds the discursive and material themes of building with other elements of difference: despite her big house, the wife of a successful logger eats fish and field greens most days.

Conclusion

This chapter serves multiple purposes and lays some groundwork for the chapters that will follow. My primary objective here is to introduce the reader to the physical environment and to the human inhabitants of that environment whose presence gave rise to ethnographic research. The second is to map out, both discursively and physically, the articulated and demarcated zones of human habitation and sociality, attending to the imperial detritus that influences the boundaries and ideas. The understanding that practice both defines and blurs the physical and ideational environments where habitation takes place and the ways that practice alters according to those same material and discursive spaces and in response to various forms of power.⁶²

A final objective that emerges from my experiences in Sambok Dung and that I have attempted to introduce in this chapter is to engage with the theoretical problem of power and agency so important in contemporary anthropological and general social theory. People talked about village heads and soldiers, *Chinese companies*, and development organizations. There are two other sources of power and agency that my interlocutors acknowledged and were actively engaged with, but which have been neglected and only recently seriously addressed in scholarly literature. The first is the physical environment and the effective and agentic forces of this

⁶² To develop this two-fold theme of practice I use Pierre Bourdieu's observations about habitus and the ways that social practices generate their own expected results. To this I add ideas about production and social forms from Marx and Engels to think about the closed, directional, and systematic ways that ideas and actions inform projects of social production: Pierre Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice* (Cambridge, U.K.; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1977); Marx and Engels, *The German Ideology, Part I*. To complicate the directionality and purpose implied in Bourdieu's habitus and Marx's modes of production, I engage with Michel de Certeau and Henri Lefebvre who attend in different registers to the problems of interference and crossings: the antagonistic movements of the everyday, which confront and confound systems and boundaries: Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*; Lefebvre, *Rhythmanalysis: Space, Time, and Everyday Life*

planet.⁶³ The second are the spirits, especially the territorial land spirits, who are deeply connected to the land and to human encounters with the land.⁶⁴ I place both of these powerful forces into my ethnography as agents at work in the contact zones of human dwelling. By attending to these other actors involved in the dance of power and subjugation I came to understand the important, and I think complementary, roles of surrender and care taking that embed people's encounters with the forces of nature and of spirit: roles that, along with the natural and spiritual world, seem to be silenced in much of the literature on subject formation.⁶⁵

The lives of villagers in this this interstitial zone at the margins of the state and the edge of the forest present a staggering array of definitional boundaries. These zones of articulation and delimitation offer glimpses into the various forces that give rise to, embark from, cross, and alter the physical and ideational landscapes of the humans who inhabit and thus demarcate that space.

⁶³ This theme is eloquently engaged by Tim Ingold in his various works. The themes I take up here are those of the interactive nature of all engagements with 'nature', and the powerful agency of the 'forces of nature' manifest in the weather-world Ingold, *Being Alive: Essays on Movement, Knowledge and Description*; Ingold, *Earth, Sky, Wind, and Weather*, S19-S38.

⁶⁴ Spirits of the land and other non-corporeal agents in the human social life of Sambok Dung are important agents and sources of power. The scholarly treatment of spirit entities as agents in their own right are scarce, but I draw from a growing body of literature that does not attempt to rationalize or structurally account for spirit activities and treats spirits as agents and actors in the social field: Edith Turner, "'this is My Profession'--Changes in African Ritual Consciousness Over Thirty-One Years," *Anthropology and Humanism* 36, no. 1 (2011); Heonik Kwon, *Ghosts of War in Vietnam* (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008); John Pemberton, "The Ghost in the Machine," in *Photographs East*, ed. R. Morris (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2009); Rosalind C. Morris, *In the Place of Origins: Modernity and its Mediums in Northern Thailand* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2000); Micheal Taussig, "Viscerality, Faith, and Skepticism: Another Theory of Magic," in *Magic and Modernity: Interfaces of Revelation and Concealment*, eds. B. Meyer and P. Pels (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003).

⁶⁵ In a recent essay on the *`anak tā* spirits in Cambodia Erik Davis explores the notion of care-taking that is embedded in relationships with spirits. I found this to be a salient theme among my friends in Sambok Dung, but it is largely absent from the scant literature on Cambodian *`anak tā*. See, Erik W. Davis, "Khmer Spirits, Chinese Bodies: Chinese Spirit Mediums and Spirit Possession Rituals in Contemporary Cambodia," in *Faith in the Future: Understanding the Revitalization of Religions and Cultural Traditions in Asia*, eds. Thomas Reuter and Alexander Horstmann (Leiden: BRILL, 2012). and also from the work of Michael Lambek, whose multi-generational relationships with Mayotte spirit mediums also presents relations of care between mediums and their spirits: Michael Lambek, "How to make Up One's Mind: Reason, Passion, and Ethics in Spirit Possession," *University of Toronto Quarterly* 79, no. 2 (2010), 720-741.. As for the role of surrender in relationships of power, especially with non-human interlocutors, the idea of surrender and of acceptance was very powerful among the people in Sambok Dung. I find similar issues discussed in which "subjection must be placed on a par with agency as a human coping strategy" Jackson, Michael, *Lifeworlds: Essays in Existential Anthropology* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2013), p. 19.

I am thinking with de Certeau's discussion of the story as a tool for "founding and articulating" space and with a Marxist approach that attends to the work of production and the effects of space and practice on the making of people and social worlds. Society and space in Sambok Dung took certain forms that grew from the stories people tell about who they are and how they came to be in this place and from the ways these stories about who is who (are you Cham or are you Khmer?) worked through both administrative and personal initiatives. The configuration of space and hence sociality also and importantly emerged from the basic work of subsistence and production: if you came as migrant labor for the wood trade, you live on state land by the railroad tracks. If you came to farm rice, you live on concession land.

Beyond the productive tensions between the stories people tell about who they are and what they are doing and the logistical and physical enactments of both the stories and basic subsistence needs, there is an important boundary that this village disrupts. A boundary that folds into a larger narrative arch of power and subject formation in Cambodia: that between the village and the forest, the *sruk* and the *brai*, respectively. Sambok Dung is both *sruk* and *brai*. All the early inhabitants have stories of their arrival when the place was "*nothing but forest*" [suddhatae *brai*], and the distinction between the *sruk* and the *brai* continues to define the traversable world for many who live in the *sruk*. This is a zone of demarcation that has deep roots in Cambodia⁶⁶ and throughout Southeast Asia,⁶⁷ but it is far more complicated than a simple distinction between

⁶⁶ The references to this phenomenon in Cambodia are numerous. I will cite here a recent volume that takes this issue as its focus and offers an excellent referent on the subject: Anne Ruth Hansen and Judy Ledgerwood, *At the Edge of the Forest: Essays on Cambodia, History, and Narrative in Honor of David Chandler* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Southeast Asia Program, Cornell University, 2008), and also Lisa Arensen's recent dissertation, Arensen, *Making the Srok: Resettling a Mined Landscape in Northwest Cambodia*

⁶⁷ Stories from upland swidden agriculturalists in SEA attend strongly to the demarcation of village from forest spaces. See: Nicola Beth Tannenbaum and Cornelia Ann Kammerer, *Founders' Cults in Southeast Asia: Ancestors, Polity, and Identity* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2003); Yukio Hayashi, *Practical Buddhism among the Thai-Lao: Religion in the Making of Region* (Kyoto, Japan: Kyoto University Press, 2003); Frédéric Bourdier and Majjhamandal Khmersiksa, *The Mountain of Precious Stones: Ratanakiri, Cambodia: Essays in Social Anthropology* (Phnom Penh, Cambodia: Center for Khmer Studies, 2006); Tsing, *Friction: An Ethnography of*

the cultivated and the wild. Each of the chapters to follow will explore in their own way this frontier and the unstable and transformative contact zone at the edge of the forest.

Global Connection; Valerio Valeri, *The Forest of Taboos: Morality, Hunting, and Identity among the Huaulu of the Moluccas* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2000).

A Roadology: Intentional acts of movement and transformation

Roads can invoke both the presence and the absence of the state. They are concrete material entities... They are concrete material entities that reveal multiple agencies... They are immobile material entities yet they draw attention to mobility...¹

This road is difficult, but it is here, in the earth. It doesn't really change much from year to year. Season to season it changes, but it's the same from year to year. The red road is easy at first, but when the rain comes, it takes the road with it: the holes are deeper and it changes harder each year until we can't even use it...²

Introduction

In the early days there were only trails through the undeveloped landscape. “Just like in the forest now,” pu Phan said, “people just built their houses, and where they walked, the road started.” In the early days, the activities of dwelling and caretaking flowed according to subsistence practices that happen with and without states and markets. Except along the railroad, where soldiers and wood cutters were busy waging war and sending forest products to market: feeding with wood the capitalist empire that created the railroad and the Khmer Rouge. In Sambok Dung the tide of empire has ceased its ebb and is beginning to flow; this chapter will investigate that turn along the hard and soft roads of the region. In 2010-12 during my fieldwork, the roads were a hybrid of forest trails and purposeful tracts: tangible material forms that bear witness to the movements of actors and make visible acts of power. Not yet the alienating “non-places” serving the needs of state makers and the flows of economic production,³ although poised for just such a transformation as the routes of regular transaction come to be roads raised

¹ Penelope Harvey, “The Materiality of State-Effects: An Ethnography of a Road in the Peruvian Andes,” in *State Formation: Anthropological Perspectives*, eds. Christian Krohn-Hansen and Knut G. Nustad (London; Ann Arbor, MI: Pluto Press, 2005) p. 131.

² Male villager, age 58.

³ Marc Augé, *Non-Places: Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity* (London; New York: Verso, 1995); David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity: An Enquiry into the Origins of Cultural Change* (Oxford [England]; Cambridge, Mass., USA: Blackwell, 1989).

by the state. These pathways did not begin with the intent to discipline travel and interaction between places, but they have come to do so.

Heavy lines are drawn between the Buddhist and the Cham neighborhoods through state-sponsored road-raising projects, and the clusters of homes in the ‘forest’ to the south of the tracks fade from view as the other tracts darken. The many trails that run through the fields and forests remain, however, and perhaps complicate de Certeau’s cityscape in which small and circuitous routes emerge after and amid the original planned grids of an urban landscape.⁴ In Sambok Dung, the networks of daily activity are the original over which the dark lines of planning are superimposed. People made these roads through traveling and gathering together: making places that have become distinct neighborhoods. They manipulate space according to their needs. “There is nothing inert in the world,”⁵ Lefebvre remarked in an effort to find the rhythms of abstract spaces, of markets and movie houses, and to break up the “homogenizing effects of hegemonic space.”⁶ “Space serves,” he notes, to highlight the active role of space and the interactive and intimate relationship between bodies in motion and the space in which they move; “space serves and hegemony makes use of it,” he says, to disrupt the comfort of the built environment and the impression that the present is a manifestation of the way things ought to be: a present in which energy and time seem static.⁷

Time and energy come starkly into view against the backdrop of the local roads. This place is an interstitial zone between forest and village and between subsistence and accumulation, as such the ebb and flow of empire is rendered visible here in ways both diachronic and synchronic: both physical and ideational. I will describe some of the monumental

⁴ Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984).

⁵ Henri Lefebvre, *Rhythmanalysis: Space, Time, and Everyday Life* (London; New York: Continuum, 2004), p. 18.

⁶ Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space* (Oxford, OX, UK; Cambridge, Mass., USA: Blackwell, 1991), p. 64.

⁷ Ibid. pp. 11, 13.

acts of road building that produce the “technological utopia” Lefebvre invokes as part of the obfuscation of economic production.⁸ Villagers recite the promises of this utopia of empire as integral to their own journeys to improve their lives, *loek jīvt*. I will also attend to the disruption of this utopia through rain and drought, through other technologies and state projects, and through the stories people tell about the destruction of their lives, *baṃphlāñ jīvit*.

By juxtaposing and highlighting the twin discourses of life-improving development and life-destroying extraction I want to complicate Bourdieu’s useful notion that legitimacy and integration emerges from immediate, “prereflexive”, agreements between objective structures and embodied structures that are largely produced by the *form* of social time.⁹ The form of contemporary social time posits a road, for example, as a legitimate need that performs modernity through its presence and through its use. That road does not, however, benefit all social actors in the same way and I suggest that there are other avenues along which these agreements between objects and bodies travel. It is not just the form of habitual social space that articulates a ‘prereflexive’ agreement between the rightness of roads and the comportment of bodies that move along them.

Particularly visible in the contact zone of Sambok Dung are new forms accompanied by stories of desire. Not embodied practices at all, but imagined practices of travel on the smooth, hard roadways that tie intimate and personal desires to the legitimizing force of a yet to be realized social form. Along with this desired form, come other practices through which the anticipating social subjects submit to the processes that will enact new forms of dwelling in the world. There is subordination to form, but not as in Bourdieu’s examples in which we are born into and fully habituated to the form of social time. Rather, the unformed form of a story that

⁸ Ibid. p. 9.

⁹ Pierre Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice* (Cambridge, U.K.; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1977), p. 163.

promises a better way of dwelling brings subordination to a new set of practices; Judith Butler suggests that it is the “rigorously repressed” knowledge of this original subordination through which the subject emerges and with it, the unconscious.¹⁰ There is smoothness over the obvious constraints and abuses that people weather in honor of the roads and development projects.

In my treatment I attempt to accommodate personal histories, embodied practices, and to complicate the problem of legitimacy and the work of social form by attending to the multiple forms of legitimizing social time visible in the contact zone of Sambok Dung. The modern state and its market ideologies and practices forms one powerful vision of “the way the world should look”, but equally powerful is the legitimizing force of life in ‘the open’ in which individuals in market scarce environments live their lives, gathering and dwelling to the rhythms of family and subsistence. Shoring up the modernizing ideologies of contemporary markets are also the still salient structures of practice and thought that remain from earlier, but equally foreign and powerful systems of domination. This chapter follows the trajectories of subsistence and of state along the regional roads and the routes soft and hard of transaction and ideation.

I start in the village, with tales about people, their movements and the gathering together of meaningful places. Then I will describe the World Food Program (WFP)-sponsored road building project that lifted village trails into roads and cut new roads straight from the brush. This ‘act of state’ moves the discussion from the trails in Sambok Dung to the newly raised, laterite sealed roads that support plantation operations and carry travelers out of the region to the paved state highway. These roads, wide and smooth at their inception, reveal the presence and the power of the state, but the continual work of the weather-world also reveals its limits and the sheer expenditure of energy necessary to create, but especially to maintain the “technological

¹⁰ Judith Butler, *The Psychic Life of Power: Theories in Subjection* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1997), p. 7.

utopia” that accompanies the modern state. The problems associated with sustaining infrastructure have dystopic effects, the most powerful example of which is the railroad and the *norrie*. The *norrie* is a motorized cart and currently the only vehicle using the tracks. I will offer a brief history of the railroad in Cambodia: a durable bit of “imperial debris” and part of the “connective tissue” that in Sambok Dung “binds human potentials” to imperial projects.¹¹ It works beyond Ann Stoler’s image of debris and ruination, however, and projects into the future, binding the crumbled to the coming empire’s vision to connect all of mainland Asia by rail.¹² The chapter will conclude back in the village along the trunk road that accompanies the rails to the market towns north and south, where ox carts, pedestrians, and motorcycles move along the rutted and precarious zones that are not yet and no longer roads, enacting the intertwined activities of subsistence and state. First, however, I offer a brief interlude to discuss the troublesome, but difficult to avoid analytical rubric of “the State”.

Theoretical Interlude

Under the gloss of state, I ask my reader to include the organs of governmentality that go beyond the state: donor organizations, NGOs, humanitarian aid organizations, etc. I also ask that the reader keep in mind Phillip Abrams’ now classic suggestion that ‘the state’ is not a real thing, but is rather a mask that obscures the “politically organized subjection” inherent in political practice.¹³ Abrams further warns that social scientists must abandon the postulate of the state because it obscures our own ideological captivity, as if the invocation of the fictional entity

¹¹ Ann Laura Stoler, "Imperial Debris: Reflections on Ruins and Ruination," *Cultural Anthropology* 23, no. 2 (2008), p. 193.

¹² Peter Hodgkinson, *Trans-Asian Railway Route Requirements: Development of the Trans-Asian Railway in the Indo-China and ASEAN Subregion*, ed. Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (New York: United Nations, 1996); ADB, *Improved South-Southeast Asia Connectivity Key to Boosting Trade Rebalancing Economy* (New Delhi: Asian Development Bank, 2013).

¹³ Philip Abrams, "Notes on the Difficulty of Studying the State (1977)," *Journal of Historical Sociology* 1, no. 1 (1988), p. 63.

brings with it its own enveloping fog. Taussig suggests the state is “a caricature” that “capture[s] the essence” of the death upon which it is founded, the copy becoming “magically powerful over the original” such that self-awareness is no protection from its “perfidious contagion of power”.¹⁴ Fiskesjö sees the state as a “potent fiction” conjured to administer social interactions, following Friedman it is the same fiction-making force that conjures gods and spirits for the same reason.¹⁵ I heed Abrams’ call to attend to the ways that the state does not exist and I distinguish between activities, like basic subsistence, that go on with or without politically organized subjection, and those, like selling surplus rice to the global market, that are effects of subjection.

I am compelled, however, despite Taussig’s warning that awareness does not dispel the magic, to address the politically organized subjection enacted by the Cambodian government and its coterie of external organs as a salient, energetic, and unified force in the place people call Sambok Dung. Abrams suggests that the state is a “unified symbol of an actual disunity” and its two aspects, structural and ideational are both are in the service of obscuring the unacceptable domination, violence, and death that found the state.¹⁶ This seems to be only part of what is going on and the ‘unified symbol’ of the state that is indeed present for villagers in Sambok Dung, who lump all donor organizations, NGOs, and micro-finance institutions, into an idea of ‘the state’, *ratth*, is a caricature once removed. The violence of its energetic source is obscured by the international donors who write the laws of subjection, but make it seem as if the laws originate from the dominated entity; the so-called modern Cambodian state thus obscures the

¹⁴ Michael Taussig, *The Magic of the State* (New York: Routledge, 1997), p. 5.

¹⁵ Fiskesjö, personal communication; see also Jonathan Friedman, *System, Structure, and Contradiction: The Evolution of "Asiatic" Social Formations* (Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira Press, 1998), p. 117.

¹⁶ Abrams, *Notes on the Difficulty of Studying the State* (1977), p. 79; Taussig, *The Magic of the State*, p. 28.

violence and death that founded the so-called democracies of the donor states. The illusion of disunity, Timothy Mitchell points out, is the “mechanism that generates resources of power”.¹⁷

This power-generating obfuscation of separation is at play in Sambok Dung right alongside the fictional unified state. It works at the level of local and national brokers of power, and creates the illusion of agency and autonomy for those actors who are charged with carrying out the agendas of donor organizations. The interesting effect of this in Cambodia and among the local authorities in Sambok Dung is the ways that both unity and separation are called into the service of domination, presenting a personalized power exercised at the local level as well as bureaucratic organization in which local officials have no authority and the power is external and impersonal. This is the messy and contradictory contact zone of the sovereign and the bureaucrat that has depoliticizing effects, as James Ferguson has famously noted,¹⁸ but also shores up sovereign rule.¹⁹

There are a myriad of external organizations with which local officials coordinate village programs: the WFP, World Bank, and Asian Development Bank, as well as NGOs promoting the creation of rice banks and cooperative health insurance initiatives, micro-credit agencies and Ministries of the Cambodian government all visited the village and interacted with villagers through meetings called by the village head during my stay. All of these governmental entities I consciously gloss as the state: Tania Li makes a compelling argument for attending to these many nodes of the apparatus of governmentality that “work on and through the desires of their

¹⁷ Timothy Mitchell, "Society, Economy, and the State Effect," in *State/culture: State-Formation After the Cultural Turn*, ed. George Steinmetz (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1999), p. 83.

¹⁸ James Ferguson, "The Anti-Politics Machine: "Development," Depoliticization, and Bureaucratic Power in Lesotho" (University of Minnesota Press).

¹⁹ See Caroline Hughes and Kheang Un, *Cambodia's Economic Transformation* (Copenhagen: NIAS Press, 2012), for a discussion of this effect in Cambodia, and for a very lucid discussion of the “articulation of authoritarian politics and neoliberal reason” see, Aihwa Ong, "Powers of Sovereignty: State, People, Wealth, Life," *Focaal* 2012, no. 64 (2012), p. 26.

target populations”, but because I am attending to the people and not the apparatus I do not address these subtleties.²⁰ This is not in an effort to cultivate the state-society binary produced in James Scott’s, *Seeing like a State*,²¹ but rather to present the multiple forces of governmentality as my interlocutors encountered them: as ‘the state’.

The imperial debris to which this chapter attends is the road, which is contrasted by attention to the trail that comes into being with or without the state.

Village travel on trails and roads

Into the forest

The trails and pathways carved by people and animals carrying out their business did not begin with the intent to discipline travel and interaction between places. Trails were forged between homesteads, forest, spirit places, fields, and markets with the intentions of meeting and supplementing basic needs: through the practice of dwelling. The dirt road that runs next to the railroad and connects the small market towns to the north and south of Sambok Dung was in use when people began to settle here, as was the railroad. The earliest routes of regular transaction were those between the railroad and the mountain.

The dirt trails that rise up from the village into the mountains have been in use for many generations and are similar from one year to the next. They change dramatically from one season to the next, or even one rainstorm to the next, but they remain in relation to their use. Water changes course coming down the mountain and washes away the beaten path; trees fall and force the carts and motorcycles to find a new route through the brush, but people accommodate these disruptions and continue on their way to cut and to gather, as has been done for generations. The

²⁰ Tania Murray Li, "Beyond 'the State' and Failed Schemes," *American Anthropologist* 107, no. 3 (2005), p. 383.

²¹ James Scott, *Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition have Failed* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998).

route is never the same, but always similar as long as the intention and destination remain unchanged.

Tim Ingold suggests that the walker on soft roads is a “wayfarer... [whose] concern is to seek a way through: not to reach a specific destination... but to keep on going.”²² There was one man who walked as such along the roads and trails of the village: he lost two families during Cambodia’s thirty years of war and people said he walked to kill the memory, *ghāt samara*. Every day, he walked up and down the roads of the village, passing all but encountering none. Most travelers along the local roads and trails, however, were going somewhere. Tā Chen, who moved here from neighboring Pursat province, traveled these routes as a young man with his father before the disruptions of Democratic Kampuchea:

My father cut trees for the French when the railroad first came here. He spent a lot of time in the forest then... The trees have valuable medicines and resins. We came here for a special bark my father used for his arthritis. All the trees in Pursat were gone at that time, so we came down here to find his medicine. He died during the era of that bastard Pot and I was too young then to remember all that he knew... After the wars, when we could enter the forest again without fear, I came to find that same bark for my own arthritis... It was thick with trees then, but those big trees are all gone now.

Chen’s story of changes to the forest fold into the waves of destruction wrought by the various empires; the trees of Pursat were decimated by French extraction, the father died an early death during Democratic Kampuchea, and the internationally funded Kingdom of Cambodia is taking down the forest again. Despite the loss of trees, the forest is still full of food that easily supplements the rice diet; ants and wasps, lizards and snakes, rabbits and birds all find their ways along these forest trails into the many pots of the village. One doesn’t need to go deep into the

²² Tim Ingold, "Footprints through the Weather-World: Walking, Breathing, Knowing," *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 16 (2010), p. S126.

forest to find these basic subsistence foods; only the hardwood trees so coveted by external markets requires more than a day's travel.

Many people dwell and move along the forest trails. The route follows the trail along the northern edge of Smau Krahom, part of Sambok Dung's 'forest' neighborhood, because it easily accommodates the cart wheels disciplining travel along routes that fold subsistence into state projects. The closer trail, south of Bung Traguan, gets too narrow at points so all the carts use the further route and turn north or south to follow the rising road up into the mountains. *"This area used to be full of trees, big ones,"* tā Chen tells me. *"Back then, we didn't have to ride so far. The forest was right here! The big trees are all gone now... Except the stand on phnam khbás,"* he added. *"That place is protected by snakes."* Tā Ben chimed in, *"I've seen them. Big snakes, this big"* he said, grabbing his thigh in illustration of their size. *"The snakes protect the trees, and even if you don't get bit you'll get sick if you cut in there. No one cuts there; even the Cham don't cut there."*²³ Chen says the trees are all gone, but there are still plenty of trees. These, I am told, are crooked or too sickly to cut; so, under the shade of this non-marketable canopy we traveled the well-worn route up and down into the mountains. I traveled with my companions in the dry season; some go during the rains, but both the malaria and the trails get worse. The effects of the rain on the road remain visible in the dry water washes that travel alongside and overrun the trail. Maneuvering them strained even the powerful buffalo and sometimes we had to get off the cart and lift the wheel out of the rut in order to continue on our way. Ta Chen was looking for large trees to sell so that he could pay back the bank for his new house: a painted wooden home on three meter high concrete piles. We rode deep into the mountains before we found the first stand of large trees.

²³ This is a reference to Cham claims to disbelief in the spirit-filled world that forms part of the on-going discourse that marks the frontier between Cham and Khmer.

Along the way we encountered other travelers, some on motorbike, but most driving ox carts. The trails intersect and converge and when we met someone returning along the same trail, tā Chen deftly maneuvered his team between the trees while the other cart passed, following the universal code of weight. The lighter load always yields to the heavier. It is difficult to take the team on some of these thin trails through the trees and up the steep inclines. Once, our trail disappeared under a large tree recently tumbled from its diseased trunk. The buffalo would not back up, so Chen unhooked them from their yoke. As we struggled to turn the cart the buffalo found the small trail that lead around the tree. “*They just followed the pigs,*” tā Ben laughed. “*There’s always a pig trail, they use our roads and we use theirs!*” Most large animals have retreated further into the deep forest, but the wild pigs remain and continue to cut new trails through the thinning forest. When we got the cart turned, Chen called the buffalo back to help us pull the cart through the thick brush back to the path.

Pigs are a danger in the forest, as they were in the village in the early years of settlement, but their palpable and threatening presence pales in comparison to the fear of malaria, which in turn pales at the prospect of the soldiers who now roam the forest and protect the company’s interests deeper in the mountains. This too is a change in the landscape; it was only the year before that the company moved in and hired local soldiers to prohibit the non-corporate extraction of timber. The soldiers work both sides of the protection racket and graciously accept bribes from their wood-seeking neighbors, who in turn sell their logs to the soldiers to saw into lumber. Before the company, people bribed those same soldiers to protect them from the *Me Brai* (forestry administration officials, literally the mother of the forest), who came to enforce the

logging bans implemented at the behest of the United Nations Transitional Authority (UNTAC).²⁴

Officials from the forestry administration continue to make visits to the forest in search of illegal loggers. I've seen them riding in small packs along the local roads: crisp uniforms, caps, and sunglasses. They too can be bribed and rarely ride into the mountains, but wait by the rails to catch the young men who go up the mountain on motorbike. These young loggers do not bring down logs for building; rather they dig out the rosewood stumps left behind and sell them for ornamentation and small furnishings. It takes days of riding through the mountain trails to find the stumps and can take a full day or more to chop and dig out all the useful pieces, which are then loaded onto the backs of their motorbikes, typically 30-40 kilos of wood, and driven out of the forest. These young men are most at risk in the shifting economy of wood and because they don't sell locally and only bribe after they are caught, both the soldiers and the *Me Brai* wait for them at the trunk road.

Their wood does not need to be planked into lumber and is small enough to carry inconspicuously covered on the backs of their bikes out to the paved road or even into the city if they want the best price. The men who engage in this high-risk economy are typically young, with little or no land, with either very young families or no wives. This is not regular steady work, but rather a way to supplement other kinds of less risky labor. The pay is good and a young man with a motorcycle can clear \$150 - \$200 per load if he is a good enough driver to escape the authorities. The precarious trails down from the mountain are many, but must be traveled with care on a fully loaded bike and the risk of detection increases once they meet the road that leads out of the village. The good drivers know the cart paths and forest trails through

²⁴ For details on the business of wood see, Le Billon, P. and Springer, S., "Between War and Peace: Violence and Accommodation in the Cambodian Logging Sector," in *Extreme Conflict and Tropical Forests*, ed. Will de Jong, Deanna Donovan, and Ken-ichi Abe (New York: Springer, 2007).

the undisciplined landscape beyond the roads; they know where the trails are and they know how to drive them. The really good drivers use all routes to evade capture. They all have friends in the village who alert them to the movements of journalists, soldiers, and police,²⁵ but because movement is constant and difficult to track, those who prosper in this business rely on the multiple ways of getting out of the forest and all the way to the paved roads where they can sell their loads.

Making the village roads

The mountain trails were carved by loggers, forest animals, buffalo, and foragers; soldiers traveled them seeking and hiding from their enemies, and the labors of contemporary wood extraction and subsistence maintain their shape and soft directionality. The roads of the village have a younger history. There are two main routes in the village that came into being with the earliest settlers after the wars that cut the perfect rice growing plains around the base of Phnam Tā `Aū. They originate on opposite sides of Phnam Tā `Aū: one goes through the Old Village and the other winds through Pūmi Tā Porn—both lead to the railroad. The early farmsteads congregated here and burned the trails to the railroad while visiting families, going to the market, and hauling logs from clearing their land. A 50-year-old Buddhist farmer described it like this:

There was nothing but forest here then, no roads, no fields. We had to clear the land to build homes and plant rice... We drove only oxcarts then, and used them to get to the fields and to the iron road. Tā Rein was buying wood then [at the railroad] and whatever we cut that we didn't use to build the house, we sold to tā

²⁵ The local network for catching illegal loggers is a complex system. It involves and implicates numerous local, provincial, and national authorities through binding relationships of patronage and corruption. The *khsae*, literally strings, that bind the various players in reciprocal relationships of power and protection will be discussed below and further expanded in chapter 3. The relationships between the local police and soldiers, who are both involved in wood-for-profit activities is complicated by the presence of journalists. There were two men resident in Sambok Dung who self-identified as journalists and I met four others who traveled through pursuing stories in the rural areas. They do publish articles in newspapers, but they are also on the lookout for logging and other illegal activities. When 'discovered' and photographed by the journalists, wood dealers can sometimes bribe the journalist, but it must be higher than the fee he gets from the Forestry Administration. If the *Me Brei* comes to the area to investigate there will be more bribes to pay and perhaps a few arrests.

Rein. After that, some of them kept going into the forest to cut wood. It was hard here, and cutting wood we could make some money... So, the buffalo made the first road; pulling carts full of wood and rice...

The roads from Grandfather Flowing Water's mountain to the railroad became darker and wider as the population grew, but they remained subject to the puddles and washouts of the rainy season and were often difficult to pass. In 2006 an urban monk with a powerful reputation for healing was called to this area. His car got stuck in the rainy season mud and a team of local boys came to unstuck him. He left the car at one of their homes on the edge of the village and accompanied by the family who called for his service, he proceeded on foot. As they walked along the muddy road, his friends told him of the cheap and fertile land in this region, of the grass hut temple, and the desperate situation of most villagers. This monk performed the healing ceremony, visited the temple, and before he left the village, had negotiated a land deal with the village head and returned to Phnom Penh with soft title to a 30x100 meter plot of land in Sambok Dung.²⁶ The next year, he financed a road that lead from the railroad tracks to just short of the temple at Phnam Tā `Aū.

Rice for Roads

Pūmi Tā Porn

Five years later, during the year of my research, the road was raised past the temple, through the neighboring village, and out into the scrubby forest beyond, where it stops abruptly amid a small stand of bamboo. This road raising project was part of a WFP initiative in which people worked for food.²⁷ Villagers were contracted to raise and pack the road by hand, and to plant grass along

²⁶ Land title remains a personally negotiated process in much of Cambodia, but this is changing and chapter 6 will outline what this looks like.

²⁷ This is part of the WFP's Productive Assets and Livelihoods Support project, which includes Food for Assets activities. Food for Assets is a program that supports the sustainable creation of community assets and at the same

the embankments to fortify and contain the road. Individuals were paid four kilos of hulled rice for each square meter of road they raised.

Along this stretch the road got much worse before it got better and the thin, but passible trail morphed daily and weekly. Ditches were dug alongside the trail, which supplied the dirt to be packed into a road and later filled with rain, fish, and buffalo. New trails dug by motorcycles wound their ways through the holes and mounds that eventually became a road. Each family was responsible for the section of road in front of their homes and villagers who did not need the rice opted out of the digging, making work for others who wanted it. Those who signed up for digging in exchange for rice were the poorest in the village. Everyone lamented the even-more-rugged state of the road during the transition, but the people ‘hired’ to do the work could not dig the road every day. One woman was quite emphatic, *“How can we dig when we can’t eat? We work every day to get money to buy food and sometimes we are too tired to dig the road.”*

I attended a meeting at the temple about the road one month before the provincial representatives would come to inspect it and decide on payment.²⁸ The slow and patchy work that characterized the raising of this road brought the village head of the neighboring village, tã Porn, to the temple. This charismatic man was the Original Buddhist traveler from Pursat when the fighting slowed in 1997 and was instrumental in village incorporation and coordinating the Social Land Concession in this region. Tã Porn gave an inspiring speech that began with a soft reprimand over the progress made on the road so far, *“Work has been slow,”* he said. *“Now work has to be everything. We can’t eat, we can’t drink—just dig that road. We will work together to finish it. It’s for all of us and the strong must help the weak.”* Porn continued with a heartfelt and

time provides off-season income-generation during the annual lean season. See WFP, “WFP Activities in Cambodia,” <http://www.wfp.org/countries/cambodia/operations> (accessed June 2, 2013).

²⁸ There was some concern over proper execution of the road and proper payment. Many rumors circulated about other road building projects in which villagers were not paid for their work because the road did not meet donor expectations.

paternal story of how this village had grown up from nothing and how he, personally, had tended and cared for the growth of the region and the people since he first arrived. He told people about his vision, he said, *“I want to see this road cut across the undeveloped land [dē raho] all the way to the red road, connecting us in this remote village to the state highway and to the rest of the country.”*²⁹ The speech ended with threats of discontinued access to development projects if the villagers did not get moving and finish this road. *“Your rice will be thrown to the wind and I won’t have the authority [‘ājñā] to approve you for other projects. If you can’t finish this one, how can I say you will finish the next one?”*³⁰

One day, we traveled with t̄a Porn along the road out to its forested end. People were working along the line, but there were still large patches not yet dug from the forest and other sections that were half finished piles of dirt with corresponding holes. On our way back, Porn told us to go on ahead as he had some business to do out here. This was just ten days before the provincial representatives were scheduled to arrive and from my perspective, having watched the process in other segments of the road, the amount of work still to be done seemed insurmountable. I assumed that Porn was hanging back that day to level his special blend of paternal menace on the workers. When I returned after the inspection, the road was done and was quite nice and easy to ride from the railroad tracks all the way to its abrupt end in the bamboo stand. In my view this was a remarkable accomplishment, but none of those who did the work shared my enthusiasm for their feat. One young mother who spent many days digging, hauling, and packing earth for the road told me, *“It was no harder than anything else out here, it was only*

²⁹ The ‘red road’ is how people referred to the laterite topped gravel roads typical of state managed roads in this region. The state highway is the paved route #5 that runs from Phnom Penh to Si Siphon in Banteay Mienchey Province. These roads will be discussed more fully below.

³⁰ The power of the village head to provide access to development initiatives is an important trope of governmentality in Sambok Dung. See also, Caroline Hughes et al., “Local Leaders and Big Business in Three Communes,” in *Cambodia's Economic Transformation*, eds. Caroline Hughes and Kheang Un (Copenhagen: NIAS Press, 2012).

hard to dig the road and do our other work. It's done, and now we can eat rice all through the rainy season." When I suggested that they also had the road, her reply was less earnest, "Yes," she said, looking at the ground. *"We have the road. It won't make much difference for me, I walk everywhere and usually cut the road."* To cut the road, *kât phlūv*, is a common expression in the village used to describe the ways around build roads; for shortening non-motorized distance, for avoiding the dangerous parts or the washed-out roads, or escaping capture. For the poor who dug, lifted, and packed it, the road was a subsistence strategy, not an improvement to their lifestyle. They worked for rice. Most of them traveled only locally and went by mostly foot; the road as a means of transport and connection was important for others.

Rice for Roads: the Old Village

The road in the Old Village was also impassable during its construction, but not because of its transitional state. The road builders on this side of the village blocked the sections they were working on and forced traffic around the road into the dry paddy and along the dykes. Significantly shorter than its 3.2 km counterpart, the road through the Old Village is only 1.6 km and was completed much more quickly. It goes from the tracks as far as the mosque where the trails pick up again toward Phnam Tā `Aū and over the water wash to the New Village. The process of road creation in the Old Village was not markedly different than that in the Buddhist neighborhood. The technique was the same: people with shovels and baskets dug ditches along the side of the trail to fill baskets that hung from a yoke on their necks and then piled and packed the dirt up onto the trail. The road was raised one meter from the original trail and was widened to three meters. Once the dirt was packed as high and wide as needed, they dug grass from the dry rice beds and planted it along the embankment. The distribution of labor was similar: each family was responsible for the road in front of their homes or fields, but in the Old Village very

few families opted out of their share of work and rice, contrary to their Buddhist counterparts. The most notable difference between the two processes was that no one traveled on the Cham road until it was finished—not walkers, not motorbikes. This innovation lessened the extra work needed each shift to repair what had been undone by the motorbikes and oxcarts. Because there was someone from the Cham neighborhood working most days on the road, their strings were respected and the roads quickly took shape.

The Cham remained focused on the task of road building and most of the road was finished a full two weeks before the scheduled inspection. When the assistant village heads of Sambok Dung came through to gauge the progress prior to the provincial inspection, just as tā Porn did with the roads on the other side of the rice fields, only one section remained undone. It was in front of the only Buddhist home on the road. This was tā Chen, who took me into the forest. He has large land holdings and herds of buffalo, many hard-working children, a powerful spirit teacher, and is adept at healing animals. He is respected and a little bit feared in Sambok Dung, a subject position he cultivates, and when the road project first appeared, he refused to participate. None solicited his portion of work to get the extra rice as many along the other road had done and both the assistant village heads and tā Chen were a bit indignant that the road was not completed. Chen was finally forced to pay his neighbors to raise the road for him. These neighbors received payment from Chen and took his share of the rice from the WFP. Chen was not the only wealthy villager who paid others above their share of the rice to do the digging; he was just the last and the only one who had to be forced. Those who could choose not to dig created a boon for those who wanted work and everyone was satisfied with the outcome. The roads are solid and the people got their rice.

The Payment

When the rice came however, two weeks later, it only came as far as the southern market town. The trucks that came up from the provincial town traveled the red road west from the paved state highway toward the town at the edge of the mountains, but could not pass the rugged road from the market town to Sambok Dung. Villagers rode oxcarts, rented motorcycle taxis, and rode the railroad *norrie* round trip in order to collect their ‘payment’ for road work. The really poor helped the less poor by loading and unloading the carts in exchange for help with transport, supplying another interesting twist to tã Porn’s suggestion that the strong help the weak. The total cost, on average, for transporting 360kg of hulled rice³¹ was 40,000 riel (about \$10 USD). This struck me as quite unjust and I was surprised that none complained about it. I even pointedly asked one of my friends, “Why do you have to pay money to get paid?” His response was quite practical, “*the truck couldn’t get through so, we had to get it ourselves.*” This practical, unbothered, sentiment toward what I perceived to be the abuses of strong against weak is one I encountered regularly. There was no disgruntlement; neither was there fear of retaliation or punishment for speaking up against injustice, I saw plenty of that too.³² Rather, there was no injustice, simply the fact that the truck couldn’t pass—accommodations had to be made. When I asked local officials why the rice was not hauled to the village where the work was done, their response was the same. The road was impassible and the truck couldn’t make the journey. When I pushed on the issue a bit and suggested that the rice could have been loaded on the *norrie* to save the poorest villagers the expense of transport, I was told, “*the organization did not approve*

³¹ This amount is equal to raising 90m² of road, the approximate amount of road in front of most homes and would feed a family of four for three months.

³² This complacency against abuses is often described in terms of subjection and of local incapacity to engage in civil actions that protect their interests. This does not really describe what is going on. It seems to be to be a lack of interest in expending energy against someone else’s abusive action. Above, I note the practical nature of their position: the effects of weather are not unjust. People do stand up for themselves, but most often they conserve their energy and steer clear of the ill wind. What is often glossed as avoiding confrontation is discussed in terms of laziness, “*I was too lazy to fight with my neighbor when he moved his paddy dike and took some of my rice field, so I moved here.*” Personal time and energy is better directed toward what brings benefit.

that kind of transport; they only sent the truck... We don't have the authority [ʿājñā] to make that decision.” The problem of authority, its presence and its lack is a part of the discursive realm of local officials, who are the purveyors of development initiatives in the village.

Theoretical Interlude

The depoliticizing effects of this development project, the end result of which was roads for motorized traffic built by non-motorized citizens who had to pay to get their payment, are stark. There was neither injustice nor conscious oppression, the project simply played out the way it did. The development initiatives designed to improve the lives of the rural poor in contemporary Cambodia all work on the under-examined assumption that economic growth and market intensification are the natural cures for poverty and that the various infrastructures necessary to bring about economic growth are naturally going to improve people's lives. In a recent report issued by the Cambodia Development Research Institute (CDRI) and funded by the World Bank,³³ the authors outline the “pro-poor strategic development framework” of the donor organizations that focus on “rural infrastructure; generating labour demand; technical changes for productivity gains; and, access to stable input, output and financial markets to support such technologies.” This will “enhance the capacity ... for small farmers to ... increase productivity and diversification.” In order for this to transpire, the authors note that “land distribution and security, agricultural modernization and diversification, and public goods (infrastructure and agricultural extension services)” must be made available to small farmers.

In my conversations with people in Sambok Dung, these initiatives were salient and were understood as much for what they promised as for the many unrealized, unequal, and destructive moments of the promise. People see their lives in this rugged place as difficult and unstable and

³³ CDRI, *Understanding Poverty Dynamics: Evidence from Nine Villages in Cambodia*. (Phnom Penh, Cambodia: CDRI; Vidyāsthān Paṇṭuḥ Paṇṭāl niñ Srāvjrāv ṭoempī Qabhivaddhn Kambujā, 2012), pp. xiii-xv.

the promise is a non-material bit of debris, a world-forming thought embodied only in the practice of the imagination.³⁴ Nonetheless, it connects people both to the French-influenced prosperous years under Sihanouk's Sangkum Reastr Niyum, before that bastard Pot, and to the utopian vision of the coming empire. The roads recently built by the poorest of residents will not be used by them, but the truth inherent in the promise that roads make a better life "saturates the subsoil of people's lives", as Stoler suggests of imperial debris, and manifests as a desire for roads even if one has no real need of them.³⁵ The 'rigorous repression' of subjection that Butler invokes applies not only to the repression of the visible abuse that this system visits on villagers and officials alike, but also to the contemporary forms of the empire.

I want to keep present the ways that current development projects mirror, continue, deploy, and reinforce the logics of empires that have come before, despite the claims that the contemporary moment is radically different from all that has come before. Like so much debris scattered over the physical and ideational landscape of Sambok Dung, development projects and international interventions are connective tissue to the legacies of ancient appropriations and colonial abuses. They manifest a "complex rearrangement...of different and intersecting logics."³⁶ In his critique of the metaphors of power, Mitchell notes how the articulation of local power into wider systems makes it seem external to ordinary life.³⁷ The shifting of local authority into a broader field of significance and responsibility is part of the redeployment of debris, local leaders are at once beholden to and improvising upon external social forms.

³⁴ This problematic tension between practice and imagination does not negate the power of Bourdieu's vision of an embodied habitus naturalized every day by the form of social life, but it does allow me to think with it beyond the structures of the body and bring in the work of stories and ideas, Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*.

³⁵ Stoler, *Imperial Debris: Reflections on Ruins and Ruination*, pp. 192-3

³⁶ Timothy Mitchell, *Rule of Experts: Egypt, Techno-Politics, Modernity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), p. 14.

³⁷ Timothy Mitchell, "Everyday Metaphors of Power," *Theory and Society* 19, no. 5 (1990), p. 567.

Village and commune leaders do use their *`ājñā*, their authority, to relieve themselves of responsibilities within projects, pointing to external authority. But they also provide soft land titles and offer protection for illegal logging; these are personal transactions that highlight the monolithic nature of the sovereign power to which they are aligned. The solidity of the bureaucratic power that binds local leaders to the precepts of donor organizations is different than the personal sovereign power that control access to resources, and both implicate the more flexible and contingent negotiations that go on when arranging the terms of rice harvest labor or the price of a load of wood. This complicates Mitchell's suggestion that "the effect of structure or institution", the state, emanates from the juxtaposition of local flexibility with external rigidity.³⁸ In Sambok Dung, the local flexibility of regular interactions that would go on with or without an external state, like work-sharing negotiations, face the more rigid, but still fluid power of the patrimonial state which is itself in thrall to the donor state that provides the illusion of solidity so important to Mitchell's point and to the technological utopia at the heart of the modern state.

The Chinese Companies

The solidity of state is also manifest in economic activities, which Mitchell rightly folds into the structure effect, and there are another set of road builders adapting space all over Cambodia. These are locally referred to as the *Chinese company*. The company's representatives began employing local wage laborers from Sambok Dung and the surrounding villages in 2009. The violence and dispossession experienced by residents inside the concession area is deeply

³⁸ Ibid., p. 572.

attested,³⁹ but few of those conflicts directly affected my interlocutors in Sambok Dung, the impact came rather from the wage labor and the roads provided by the *Chinese company*.

Only the most desperate of villagers went to work for the plantations, and everyone had stories about the undesirability of the jobs they offered. Tep Monung, a 25-year-old mother of three told me,

I went to work for the Chinese company last year. They promised one kilo of rice and 10,000 riel per day [about \$2.50 USD]. I thought I could get ahead while my husband worked cutting wood here [in Sambok Dung]. The first month I had no money and ran credit from the stores for my food and cooking oil. At the end of the month, most of my 250,000 riel [about \$65USD] went to pay the shops. I had 40,000 riel [\$10 USD] after a month of work. I came back home. The Chinese company has jobs, but it's not really a job: it's only low wages and high expenses [prâc dâp camñây khbâs].

Countering this discourse of low wage high expense, was the desirability of the roads that accompanied plantation development and the ease of travel they promised along what used to be oxcart trails through the lowland forest.

Talk of the *Chinese company's* roads colored numerous conversations in the shade of houses, at the Buddhist temple, or at the stalls of the small vendors along the trunk road in Sambok Dung. Talk was initiated by those few who conducted business outside the village or from travelers passing through, but most often it traveled along second and third hand recitations from these travelers. I was privy to discussions that cut the travel time from the village to the provincial town of Pursat in half and invoked images of wide roads all the way from the northern market town to the state highway; these stories focused on ease of travel and increased revenues, especially among those with rice or services to sell. But there were also stories of restricted

³⁹ Keo Mondul, "Pursat Village Chief Leads Protest Against the Pheapimex Company," *Radio Free Asia* 2011; Sophakchakrya Khouth, "Road Blocked in Pheapimex Protest," *The Phnom Penh Post* 2010.; Simon Springer, *Cambodia's Neoliberal Order: Violence, Authoritarianism, and the Contestation of Public Space* (London; New York: Routledge, 2010).

access: yāy Triep rode the *lān jhnūt*⁴⁰ from the northern market town out to the state highway along the new plantation road. “*They tried to kill us!*” she recounted excitedly under the house one evening.

As soon as we turned onto the new road, a truck with four company guards standing in back started following us. They drove fast and got up alongside the driver. One of the men shouted from the back at the driver, ‘You better get off this road,’ he said... Then they drove so close to us and our car had to drive down into the ditch to not get hit. They turned around and drove back, right at us then. I was so scared. They swerved just in time, but shouted again, ‘This isn’t your road. This is the company’s road. Stay off.’

The development of infrastructure, jobs, and economic growth envisioned through the Economic Land Concessions in Cambodia are not necessarily fictions, but in practice they are not what people were expecting. The low wages of local plantation jobs are scoffed by semi-affluent families, who pay the fees to send their children to Thailand or Malaysia for wage labor that yields \$200-400 USD per month, after expenses. Only the most poor went to work for the *Chinese company* and the pay was just enough to feed the worker. Neither the schools nor health care facilities promised by company representatives have yet materialized; of the projected infrastructure enhancements, only the roads are visible as contested sites of access and ownership.

The Red Roads

The laterite provincial roads that connect the market towns north and south of Sambok Dung to the state highway do not invoke the glamorous specter of economic power promised by the plantation roads made of the same material. This is mostly due to the large potholes and piles of gravel that alter their terrain. Unlike the smooth and oft-repaired roadways of the company, the

⁴⁰ The *lan chnool*, literally rentable car, is a ubiquitous feature of rural transportation. It is typically a van that departs from most towns (not Sambok Dung, but both market towns), making numerous stops along their way to the big cities. They are a reliable means of transport and are often packed beyond capacity with people, products, and sometimes motorbikes.

provincial roads vary from wide flat expanses of brand new two-lane gravel roads to wide uneven spaces where motorcycle trails wind around puddles and rocks—sometimes leaving the road altogether to avoid the dangerous mud of water flows. From the southern market out to the state highway, the red road was new, wide, and flat when I arrived in the fall of 2010. The importance of this road in the discourse of Sambok Dung was first and foremost speed and ease. Ming Thé marveled that her brother could travel from Phnom Penh in his car, then take the *norrie* and arrive in Sambok Dung in just over two hours. Beyond speed, there was talk of the coming network of roads that would, “*connect us to the big roads* [jâp phlūv tham]” and increase local access to goods and services. Trucks hauling construction equipment and materials could now enter the region and surplus rice could more easily and profitably travel out to market. The benefits of these changes were almost universally reported; only a very few, those whose years taught them to be skeptical of ‘progress’ and those whose poverty excluded them from profit and wealth, leveled critique against the coming tide of empire.

The critiques were few but the dangers were many and the red road was deadly and mercurial.⁴¹ The dust kicked up by speeding cars and trucks obscured small motorbikes and blinded their drivers in the cloud. Three such motorbikes were hit by other speeding cars during my stay, two of the invisible drivers died.⁴² Road travel was always more dangerous without a car if the road was wide and flat. After just one rainy season, however, the new road was rutted by run-off, and large holes surprised speeding vehicles. During the rains, laterite is a slippery surface and two-wheeled vehicles were difficult to maneuver. Travelers inquired into road conditions before embarking, using local gossip to determine the best route out of Sambok Dung.

⁴¹ The dual attributes of progress and danger also apply to the state highway and the roads in Phnom Penh. The danger on the paved roads is primarily from the mix of large high-speed vehicles, motorbikes, ox carts, and pedestrians traveling together.

⁴² See also, Rudolf Mrázek, *Engineers of Happy Land: Technology and Nationalism in a Colony* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2002), on the phenomenon of invisibility in the hierarchy of travel along colonial roads.

One time, we traveled the pathways and back trails all the way from the village to the state highway. *“If you have to leave today, cut the road—it’s better and faster. Without a car it’s dangerous.”* The joy with which a two hour trip to the city was reported changed back into the warnings and laments people give for all travel, *“it’s far and the road is difficult, you should take the lān jhnūl.”*

The rains push against the capacity of state forces to keep roads passable for their intended purpose. At the end of the rains in 2011, trucks filled with laterite drove up and down the new road from the state highway to the southern market town, piling gravel next to holes in the middle of the road and along the run-off ravines. Soon a motorbike trail emerged, packing down the best route through the obstacles, which resembled the well-worn trail that winds its way along the more treacherous red roads from the northern market town to the state highway (built in 2006). As the road changes from its hard-packed, speed enhancing newness into the rutted and potholed trail common in the region it is a non-event. Much desired routes of local transport born of decentralization projects are not yet fully realized promises of development, but their ephemeral nature neither bolsters nor diminishes the power or the presence of the state. The technological utopia in which the human can intervene into the power of the weather-world is welcomed and desired, even while the fraught nature of such an undertaking is appreciated and accommodated.

From Sambok Dung to the Market Towns North and South

All over Cambodia the turning tides of empire channel intentional energies towards decades of neglected infrastructure and market intensification. On the parallel transport routes that run between the two market towns, cutting through Sambok Dung on the way, this process is visible in multiple stages. In this section, I will present the distinctive routes in Sambok Dung that

transport villagers and products to market and will attend to Stoler's notion that "the rot that remains" does not remain in a place where the men have all gone, but is rather the rot that continues. It is, as Stoler suggests, what we are left with.⁴³ What remains in Sambok Dung is the crumbling railroad, a dirt trail to the northern market town that changes with the patterns of use and weather, and a cavernous ruin of recent road building connecting to the southern market town.

The railroad is the kind of "large-scale ruin" that takes planning and resources.⁴⁴ It was first proposed in 1880 as part of a line that would connect Saigon and Phnom Penh and continue north past Battambang to the Thai border, but the route from Phnom Penh to Sisophon (north of Battambang) only became operational in the mid-1930s. The purpose of this line was efficient extraction. The colonial administration fully understood the advantage of hard rails over soft roads that succumbed to "*the quality of the sun and the quantity of rain that falls in Indo-China...*",⁴⁵ but the cost of implementation was more than the empire could manage and the majority of the projected lines never materialized. Nonetheless, the truncated run from the Phnom Penh to the north carried large quantities of rice and timber to market from its inception until the French lost control of the region in 1941.⁴⁶ The section of tracks that connect Sisophon to Thailand was completed by the Thai in 1942 when the region was under Thai control, and the line connecting Phnom Penh to the deep-water port at Kompong Som was organized by Sihanouk with funding assistance from French, West German, and Communist Chinese sources.

⁴³ Stoler, *Imperial Debris: Reflections on Ruins and Ruination*, p. 203.

⁴⁴ Ibid., pp. 202, 211

⁴⁵ Ibid. p. 34.

⁴⁶ Gouvernement Général de L'Indochine, *Chemins De Fer: Statistiques De L'Année 1934* (Hanoi: Imprimerie Trung-Hoa, 1935).

Construction on that southern leg to the coast began in 1960, but the tracks were not fully operational until 1969.⁴⁷

The iron road is part of the connective tissue of the state, which in Sambok Dung quite literally binds the soft trails and seasonal rhythms of subsistence to the small market towns north and south of the village. The colonial project enacted in Cambodia by the French at the close of the nineteenth century was founded on laws and treaties that hold ends similar to those of contemporary road builders in Cambodia. David Chandler suggests that from the beginning of the colonial era, and “especially after the economic boom of the 1920s... independent, prerevolutionary Cambodia... was being built...”⁴⁸ After the thirty years of revolutionary fallout the building resumes with the same rhythm. The words of a French Doctoral Candidate in his thesis on, *Les Chemins de Fer*, are echoed in the excerpts cited above concerning development in contemporary Cambodia. He says, “*The first result of the French era in Indo-China is the vigorous measures that guarantee the liberty and property of the native populations; the second is in constituting the economic tools necessary to meet their needs.*”⁴⁹ To these twin objectives of colonial railroad building the author adds, “*The railroad is an effective instrument for pacification and maintaining order in a vast country where it is not possible to maintain a large military presence.*”⁵⁰ Despite the benevolence inherent in guaranteeing the property and liberty of the natives, the military use of the railroad was quite significant for the French in Tonkin and Annam, what is now northern and central Vietnam. It was not put to use in that capacity by the Khmer until 1980.

⁴⁷ Brendan R. Whyte, *The Railway Atlas of Thailand, Laos and Cambodia* (Bangkok, Thailand: White Lotus Press, 2010), pp. 159-69.

⁴⁸ David P. Chandler, *A History of Cambodia* (Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 2008), p. 170.

⁴⁹ Alexandre Vérignon, “Les Chemins De Fer En Indo-Chine” Impr. H. Jouve). The passage was personally translated from the French.

⁵⁰ Ibid. p.37.

When the Vietnamese-backed People's Republic of Kampuchea took control of Phnom Penh, ousting the Khmer Rouge state of Democratic Kampuchea in 1979, the rails and their vehicles were decimated, destroyed by U.S. bombing raids. Andy Mertha gathered testimony from members of the Communist Party of Kampuchea working during the DK era. They suggest that rebuilding the railway network was a priority for the KR. With the help of China and other communist nations, tunnels were blasted through mountains, standard gauge rails were installed, and carriages were provided.⁵¹ The Khmer Rouge used the rail, as evidenced by a famous photograph of Pol Pot and his coterie taken in a rail car in 1975.⁵² Other evidence of rail use during Democratic Kampuchea is difficult to assess, however, and it suffered willful destruction by the ultra-modernist regime.

My interlocutors who lived in Cambodia's western region where the rail line runs during those years of dislocation suggest that the rails were quiet: people walked to new villages when relocated and only trucks sometimes carried workers or rice. The Khmer Rouge were not completely anti-technology, as evidenced by many other works projects coordinated with China,⁵³ but they were conscious of isolating themselves from capitalist markets and local rumor suggests that this is why the tracks were lifted between Sisophon and Thailand.⁵⁴ The remainder of the route and the transport vehicles suffered from both purposeful destruction and neglect

⁵¹ Andrew Mertha, *Brothers in Arms: Chinese Aid to the Khmer Rouge, 1975-1979* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2014), p. 53.

⁵² You can see this photo in many places, in connection to the railroad see, R. Juskalian, "Catching the Bamboo Train: Cambodia's Improvised Transport System Proves just the Ticket for Local and Western Travelers," *SMITHSONIAN* 41, no. 9 (2011), 62-69. One man from Phnom Penh in 1979 tells of being transported by train to Kampong Chhnang in 1979 in Michael Vickery, *Cambodia, 1975-1982* (Boston, MA: South End Press, 1984), p. 205.

⁵³ These include an airport in Kompong Chhnang and improvements to the deep-water port in Kompong Som, but were constrained by what Andrew Mertha describes as a "contradiction of technical imperatives in a milieu of deadly political infighting" Andrew Mertha, "Surrealpolitik: The Experience of Chinese Experts in Democratic Kampuchea, 1975-1979" (Imagining Cambodia: Cambodia Studies Conference, Northern Illinois University, 2012). The debris that remains from these projects are also addressed in, Andrew Mertha, *Brothers in Arms: Chinese Aid to the Khmer Rouge, 1975-1979* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2014).

⁵⁴ Anecdotal evidence is all that is currently available on Khmer Rouge reasons for destroying that portion of the line.

during Democratic Kampuchea and when the Khmer Rouge were ousted by the Vietnamese, they left behind burnt and pillaged railway engines and large sections of track missing, burnt, or dismantled. The new government set the rails to rights and refurbished the engines to use in the interest of national reconstruction.

One man who was involved with the resurrection of the railway told me his story. I will cite him at length here:

We repaired the engines and they sent the norries along to repair the lines. The engines were all burnt: some had no motors and were missing parts. The tracks were bad, too. They [the Khmer Rouge] burnt a lot of the wooden ties and in some places they lifted the track all together: wood and metal all gone. ... When the trains started running, the government used them to haul rice and cooking oil out to the provinces. The people were suffering; there was not enough food and supplies in the provinces. ... These trips were dangerous; the Khmer Rouge were everywhere in this western region. They were strong in Kompong Speu and all the way up to Pursat; we brought soldiers with us to protect the passengers and supplies... People were traveling a lot, looking for work and for family. The trains ran only once each day. We travelled north for two days, stopping in Pursat overnight, and then two days south... We were attacked every time but still we carried passengers and brought provisions to the provinces... and we carried passengers and wood back to the city... The soldiers out here, they would send logs to the city... At that time there were still big logs, as big as four men can hug; the government sold them for supplies and salaries. At first, we were paid with rice! There was no money!

The norries were for repair. They were slow and run by hand. They carried tools and repair supplies and would alert us to dangers along the route. Sometimes a bridge would get damaged in the fighting and we would have to wait... all the fighting caused a lot of damage and the tracks were old too. There were repairs, but things were pretty run down, the norries worked all the time...

After the peace began in 1990, there was still fighting... We carried soldiers and passengers, but we started carrying supplies back from Thailand. Lots of people were traveling then, it was illegal to carry the goods from Thailand, but the police weren't too strict about it. Everyone wanted the stuff and people made a lot of money carrying it... Wood too, that's when we started carrying a lot of wood. People could sell and people could buy again... When we could buy again, the norrie drivers bought motors for their carts and they started carrying stuff too. They carried passengers then too... and started running in between the train. It was dangerous, but people were moving and everyone wanted the merchandise from Thailand.

Once the war stopped, the tracks didn't need so many repairs and the government stopped paying the norries to work. They stopped making repairs and people stopped using the train so much... The norries were working all the time, though. They made money carrying people and stuff to sell, and wood: lots and lots of wood. That's when we could sell wood to Thailand and Vietnam... The trains hardly ran then, we only went once a week and stopped carrying passengers, but the norries ran all the time. There were no repairs, though and then the tracks, especially the bridges, got so dangerous that we had to stop the trains. That was in 2009.

The norries are now the only vehicles on the tracks and they make short, semi-scheduled runs between the market towns every morning and evening.⁵⁵ They are hand-made wooden platforms set atop two railroad axels, anchored in place by gravity. The small motor is placed on the back of the platform and attached to the rear axle by a belt that speeds or slows according to the long stick that the driver uses to rev the motor. They haul morning passengers headed to the market towns north or south for school, for shopping, or to catch a *lan jhnual* to the city. They also carry wood and charcoal in the evening, when trucks wait at the markets to haul the contraband on overnight runs to the capital, to the Thai or Vietnamese borders, or to the port. Each town has their own norrie transport system and if one has the time and money, rail travel from Phnom Penh to Sisophon is possible. No locals make this journey, however, and the norrie is used up and down the line primarily by those who live close to the rails and far from the roads in order to access the market towns.

In the early stages of rail renovation in 2006⁵⁶ funds were allotted for purchasing norries from individuals in consideration of their projected loss of livelihood; many former drivers accepted payment for their vehicles. But the anticipated rail development has yet to materialize and the norrie continues to rule the rails in a surprisingly well coordinated system of transport. From Sambok Dung, one can catch the norrie headed north at around five—morning and evening; headed south around six. Other times can be negotiated with the drivers for private

⁵⁵ In some areas, especially in Battambang, the norrie has become a tourist attraction and is referred to as the “bamboo train” in the travel and popular literature on Cambodia. See, Juskalian, *Catching the Bamboo Train: Cambodia's Improvised Transport System Proves just the Ticket for Local and Western Travelers*, 62-69; Stephen Kurczy, “JAUNT THROUGH ASIA: Stephen Kurczy, a Free-Lance Writer Formerly Based in Phnom Penh, Rides the Soon-to-be Defunct Local Trains in Cambodia made of Bamboo and Salvaged Wheels”, *FAR EASTERN ECONOMIC REVIEW* 172, no. 7 (2009), 76-78.

⁵⁶ JARTS, *Cambodia: Preparing the Greater Mekong Subregion: Rehabilitation of the Railway in Cambodia* (Phnom Penh: Asian Development Bank; Japan Railway Technical Service in association with Nippon Koei Co., Ltd. and Engconsult Ltd. Tokyo, Japan For the Ministry of Public Works and Transport, Royal Government of Cambodia, 2006).

transport and the proliferation of the cell phones makes these contracts of convenience even easier. The rails are certainly dangerous, however, and once the norrie drivers changed from repair providers to market entrepreneurs, the number of accidents rose dramatically, as did the number of norries on the tracks. All norrie drivers tell tales of meeting the trains with their fully loaded carts; even though Cambodian trains moved slowly along the decrepit tracks, unloading a full cart and removing it from the tracks before the train arrived produced injuries.

I heard only one story of death by *norrie*, but there were raucous tales of being grazed by the engine skirt or running for cover as the train plowed the cart and its contents off the tracks. Few repairs have been done on these rails since the early 1990s and none at all since the trains stopped running in 2009; I could fit my whole hand into some of the gaps between the derelict rails. Sometimes when the machine hit an unstable break, the entire platform lifted off the axels, smashing spines and occasional pots with the return impact. After one such occasion, a woman sitting on a large bag of bamboo shoots she had gathered in the forest and was taking to sell market leaned into my ear and told me she once flew clean off the platform and into the brush after one of those jumps. With a wily grin she lifted her sarong to show me the long scar on her leg from the incident. Despite the nagging danger of the *norrie*, few villagers look forward to its demise. The woman who showed me her scar expressed a sentiment I heard before when she said, rather sadly, “*When the trains come again, we won’t be able to use the rails anymore. I don’t know how I’ll get to market.*”

The violence of life at the margins of the Cambodian state comes from more than the landmines and the memories of that bastard Pot and these stories of imperial roads put a twist on

Walter Benjamin's invocation of violent law making and the violence necessary to sustain it.⁵⁷ In my story the laws enacted upon the land by building market-centered roadways require endless infusions of energy. The crumbling railroad, still productively used locally, cannot sustain the onslaught of time and the weather-world, which I suggest represents the Divine Violence invoked in Benjamin's piece. The iron rails are more persistent than the machine-constructed dirt road, but less resilient than the trail that accompanies the rails to the northern market town. The violence of the ever-shifting planet does not exact a heavy toll on the soft trails, only on the hard smoothness created in the service of other laws.

The northern market route is a thin trail of fifteen kilometers, wide enough for one ox cart to pass. This segment of road is in Pursat province and has suffered no improvements save hand-made wooden bridges over the deep-water washes. The trail dips and winds around holes, all of which fill with puddles in the rains of July and are parched in April. In the dry season, only one of the four bridges is necessary and the heavy trucks can make the journey. With regular traffic, a wooden bridge has a four to five year life-span before needing repairs: unless a fully loaded truck passes over it, in which case it either breaks or doesn't. The repair system in Sambok Dung involved everyone ignoring the broken section of bridge for a while, waiting to see if it got fixed. Then, both times, the head of the temple association took on the project: he would raise a little money, gather a few hands and tools, beg some round wood from the soldiers,⁵⁸ and go fix the bridge. This is a patch job, and after a while a bridge can have seven or more of these.

One bridge was completely missing on one side and patched and holey on the other. About a month into my stay I had an incident on that bridge in which I caught the tire of my

⁵⁷ Walter Benjamin, "Critique of Violence," in *Reflections: Essays, Aphorisms, Autobiographical Writings*, ed. Peter Demetz, trans. Peter Demetz (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1978).

⁵⁸ These are the butt ends of the planked logs typically used for fencing and available at low cost or free from the owners of portable saw mills.

motorbike on one of these patched holes and lost my balance. My inexperience and fear conspired with the unstable terrain and I put my bike right in the river. I realized what was coming and I jumped from the bike before it sailed off the bridge, carrying my unsuspecting passenger into the shoulder deep river. He was not hurt and together we got the bike out and back onto the bridge. Pushing the bike home, both of us soaking wet, was cause for great jocularly and teasing by friends and strangers alike—everyone knew what had happened. Over the following days, I was regaled by stories of bridge adventure until a short time later when a similar event stemmed the humorous tide.

Another man went off the bridge, the same one I did, but rather than simply splashing into the river, he hit one of the many slim tree stumps at the bottom and badly damaged his thigh. Bridges may, as Heidegger suggests, “gather the earth as landscape around the stream.” But they also, and importantly, frustrate all attempts as such gathering: mocking the “ease and power” of utopian fantasies.⁵⁹ Even without the bridges in the rainy season oxcarts and motorbikes can get through. It’s not always a straight shot, but it can be done. This is a trail worn into the soft earth over time that shifts and moves following weather and travelers. It is always passable by locals, but not always without incident.

The road to the southern market town is a product of history enacted with reference to the law.⁶⁰ This dirt track is the most treacherous of all local roads and was constructed with the most technological interventions. The 12km stretch between Sambok Dung and the southern market town was built by the commune chief in 2009, a move that was supposed to gain him local

⁵⁹ Martin Heidegger, “Building Dwelling Thinking,” in *Martin Heidegger*, ed. D. F. Krell (London: HarperPerennial/Modern Thought, 2008), p. 354.

⁶⁰ This is the 2001 Law on the Administration and Management of Communes and the Law on Commune Elections; the purpose of which was to induce decentralization so that Cambodia can enact the recommendations of the World Bank outlined above. See, Heng, Seiha, Kim, Sedara, So, Sokbunthoeun, Vidyāsthān Paṇṭuaḥ Paṇṭāl niṇ Srāvjrāv Ṭoempī Qabhivaḍḍhn Kambujā, *Decentralised Governance in a Hybrid Polity: Localisation of Decentralisation Reform in Cambodia* (Phnom Penh, Cambodia: CDRI, 2011).

support and admiration. He took his newly allocated yearly budget of \$9,000 and used it to build the road using machines hired from the provincial capital. His intentions were good and his plan supported the World Bank development objectives outlined above for improved infrastructure, for local autonomy in executing development objectives, and local desire for better access to goods and services. It stands now as a testament to the foils of rapid development and becomes more controversial each year that its incomplete status allows continual deterioration.

Before the improvements, the route was a dirt track like the one described above, plagued by water wash-outs and puddles: impassable by four wheeled vehicles in the rainy season, but always present for local traffic. This ‘road’ now alternates between fields of cavernous gullies where the packed earth departed with the rain, and long stretches of deep, loose sand where the previously packed earth changed composition through the dry-season pressures of heavy trucks and constant sunshine. A thin motorbike trail winds along the high points of the caverns and lightly packs a route through the sand. Locals who had just finished digging their own roads had a lot to say about the sorry state of this expensive stretch of lakes and caverns, gullies and sand pits.

The new expert road builders in the village commented at length on the inability of the machine to properly pack the earth as they had done, and further on the road builder’s lack of foresight in leaving the embankments simply packed earth. “*For the road to stay hard, you have to plant grass,*” I was told by a 65-year-old Cham rice farmer in Sambok Dung. “*The people would have planted grass,*” he said, “*and the road would have held.*” The road was incomplete beyond its lack of grassy embankments; most notable was its lack of solid bridges. The machines cut and banked the road so the water could flow easily under the bridges obviously intended to span the embankments. Local labor built temporary wooden bridges shortly after the road was

complete in 2009, but when I arrived in 2010, most of them were rotted and falling through, and two gave way completely during my stay.

The many off-road detours around loosely constructed bridges coupled with the grabbing sand and beckoning caverns make for a treacherous, but exhilarating motocross experience. The only truly reliable mode of transport on this route is one's feet with the oxcart coming up a close second. Cars and trucks can pass only in the dry season and motorbikes make the trip year-round, but not without incident. Shortly after the demise of one bridge I drove my bike down the embankment to go through a deep, but consistently passable water flow. Before I reached the other side of the pond, however, my engine stalled and the bike rose, floating in the deep water. I pushed and pulled the bike to the other side and while I worked, three other motorbikes joined me on the other side of the pond to dry spark plugs and blow water from gas lines and air filters. The third driver to succumb to the deep water grabbed a long stick and waded into the middle of the pond, there he planted the stick sticking up out of the water about four feet, the universally accepted road sign for 'impassable'. This stick resembled another stick stuck in the 'road' above in front of the 'bridge' that is now just two logs running parallel across the gorge with a few boards still holding fast between them. The stick above directs traffic down off the road to cross the water flow below. The stick in the pond directs traffic past the water and into the forest. It was only a few hours before a new trail emerged, leading around the small lake and through the forest to join first a cart trail and then the main track a little further on.

Missing bridges and the impromptu trails that accommodate them are accepted parts of the soft and malleable world where people live. There is a certain stability in the constancy of the rain and the predictability of change. None are surprised that the rain washed away the road; such is the way of things. There is discussion, however, about the ways of state; about

corruption, exploitation, and the unequal fulfillment of development's promises. Local gossip suggests that the Commune Chief's decision to use machines rather than local labor was politically motivated, "*the government gives him money and he hires the nephew of the provincial governor to build the road, it all follows the strings* [tam khsae]." These *khsae* cinch together political power and economic access across Cambodia.⁶¹ Although much maligned in international assessments of Cambodia's 'progress',⁶² *khsae* become local sites of stability through which incongruous and shifting developmental programs can make sense. Villagers explained the Commune Chief's decision to use machines through a logic in which he is bound to certain types of action in the face of higher powers, just as the un-protected embankments of the road are bound to wash away in the rain. The *khsae* logic of Cambodia's political and economic power maintains the connection between ideologies of power⁶³ and the material processes of road building. Political power in Cambodia is not external to ordinary life and despite efforts at decentralization, money and economic contracts move along *khsae* that connect local officials to national leaders in networks as unstable and shifting as the rural roads.

Hand-packed rural roads have, however, been demonstrated to be both cheaper and more durable.⁶⁴ When I asked him why he chose to use machines for his road rather than local labor, the Commune Chief did not cite political obligations. He told me that he believed the machines

⁶¹ For discussions of this phenomenon at work in Cambodia see, Sheila Dominique Rita Scapis, "Cambodia's String Economy" University of Melbourne, Department of Resource Management and Geography); Caroline Hughes, *The Political Economy of Cambodia's Transition, 1991-2001* (London; New York: RoutledgeCurzon, 2003). For a discussion of how these strings attach to global commodity chains see, Philippe Le Billon, "The Political Ecology of Transition in Cambodia 1989-1999: War, Peace and Forest Exploitation," *Development and Change* 31, no. 4 (2000), 785-805; Simon Springer, "Renewed Authoritarianism in Southeast Asia: Undermining Democracy through Neoliberal Reform," *Asia Pacific Viewpoint* 50, no. 3 (2009), 271-276.

⁶² Hughes et al., *Local Leaders and Big Business in Three Communes*.

⁶³ In Cambodia and much of Southeast Asia, campaign strategies include temple offerings and overt attention to cosmological processes and ascetic practice through which individuals earn the privilege to rule, chapter five will address this more fully.

⁶⁴ Paul Munters, *Jobs Or Machines: Comparative Analysis of Rural Road Work in Cambodia* (Bangkok: International Labour Office, 2003).

would, “*do the job better and faster than the people could. What I didn’t expect,*” he told me, “*was that the provincial office would eat the rest of the money.*”⁶⁵ The decentralization project in Cambodia is plagued by more than Cambodia’s intractable patrimonial system, there is also a lack of clear understanding and communication between the commune, district, and provincial levels of responsibility as outlined by the World Bank sponsored Cambodian laws.⁶⁶ The commune chief was attempting to act responsibly and expressed a real desire to, “*raise up the lives and improve the conditions in my commune.*” His efforts ran aground against the violence of both the weather-world and the law, which renders him at once empowered and impotent.

Conclusion

Scholars examining development projects and ideologies in various parts of the developing world level justified critiques at the process; James Scott questions why they do not achieve their stated goals;⁶⁷ James Ferguson suggests that the productive question is not why they fail, but rather, what they do: their unintended consequences that produce a “particular” sort of state power while also “exerting a powerful depoliticizing effect.”⁶⁸ Tania Li adds to this insight and notes that depoliticized state power is explicitly not coercive. People choose and desire the enhancements promised by the state,⁶⁹ as long as they are fairly distributed. Li also points carefully to the non-explicit connections between the objectives of development programs

⁶⁵ The verb ‘to eat’ is used to refer to many acts of state; it is notable that in the Cambodian language, like many others in South and Southeast Asia, the king does not reign over a kingdom or rule a kingdom: a king *eats* a kingdom.

⁶⁶ Sreang Chheat et al., *A Baseline Survey of Sub-National Government: Towards a Better Understanding of Decentralisation and Deconcentration in Cambodia* (Phnom Penh: CDRI; Vidyāsthān Paṇṭuḥ Paṇṭāl niñ Srāvjrāv toempī Qabhivaḍḍhn Kambujā, 2011).

⁶⁷ Scott, *Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition have Failed*.

⁶⁸ Ferguson, *The Anti-Politics Machine: "Development", Depoliticization, and Bureaucratic Power in Lesotho*, p. 21.

⁶⁹ See also, Penelope Harvey, "The Materiality of State-Effects: An Ethnography of a Road in the Peruvian Andes," in *State Formation: Anthropological Perspectives*, eds. Christian Krohn-Hansen and Knut G. Nustad (London; Ann Arbor, MI: Pluto Press, 2005). on the desirability of the state.

and the ways these projects “help prepare villagers for the expansion of global capital.”⁷⁰ On this point of the connection between development and capitalist expansion Timothy Mitchell draws clear lines, but goes further to highlight human agency as just one among many conspirators that bring about the often unintended consequences of development projects and the roll of technology in the transformation of social and political practices through the violence of law.⁷¹

One unintended consequence of manufacturing local empowerment through elections and budgets in Sambok Dung was a \$9,000 road that was impassible and far more dangerous than its predecessor after just two years of weather and use. Another was that rice from the WFP, intended as payment for a road-building project designed to alleviate poverty in the area, could not be delivered and the people had to pay to haul it themselves. One interesting notch in these two scenarios is that local power was not decentralized at all. In fact, the layers of local jurisdiction have served to strengthen, rather than diffuse, the centralized nature of political and economic power in Cambodia. People certainly know of the international and NGO organizations, but all organizations get their aid to villagers through the local officials, who have the *‘ājñā* to direct it as they see fit. The villagers who received rice for building roads knew the program was sponsored by the WFP, but they all told me they were, “*thvoer kār ratth, working for the state.*” While there is much discussion in the scholarly community as to whether or not the state exists and what forms that state may take and how we can talk about it, among the people in Sambok Dung there is little puzzling over this problem. One 35-year-old, landowning

⁷⁰ Tania Murray Li, *The Will to Improve: Governmentality, Development, and the Practice of Politics* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007), pp. 10, 267, 280.

⁷¹ Mitchell, *Rule of Experts: Egypt, Techno-Politics, Modernity*.

father of five made this distinction: “*They are all the state: if they come to eat us, they have power. If they come to help us with roads and doctors, they are civilized.*”⁷²

The efforts of donor organizations and international financial institutions to instill the technologies of “good governance” in Cambodia have given rise to an interesting obfuscation in Sambok Dung through which the poverty-making activities of economic intensification are not erased, as they can be in the smooth aesthetics of roads, machines, and market goods,⁷³ but are rather, displaced onto the now dysfunctional patrimonialism of the pre-colonial Southeast Asian state. When local infrastructure could not support the rice delivery from the civilized organization, the only recourse for the Commune Chief was to pay from his own pocket to have the rice delivered. It would have cost about \$50 (USD), a full quarter of his monthly salary. Perhaps he would have been reimbursed, perhaps not, but his power to ‘serve’ his constituents in the spirit of ‘good governance’ was in the hands of the donor. Faced with this situation, he played the functional bureaucrat saying, “*‘át mǎn `ājñā I don’t have the authority*” when asked why no alternate transport was arranged to bring the rice closer to the people. The addition of a discretionary development budget for the commune chief and the funneling of all humanitarian and international aid projects through the structures of local leadership serve to make the exploitative activities of logging and land capture seem more ‘illegal’. In this way they bring the face of the state as ‘good governor’ into view alongside the sovereign face already understood and accommodated by residents. But the centralized donor projects are equally productive of the exploitation and marginalization of the poorest villagers.

⁷² The term ‘to eat’ is applied to rulers in the Cambodian language and is also used in other Southeast Asian contexts. A king does not rule his kingdom, he eats it.

⁷³ For an entertaining and insightful discussion of the obsession with smoothness and hardness among the colonial masters in Indonesia, see Mrázek, *Engineers of Happy Land: Technology and Nationalism in a Colony*.

The roads funded through the WFP initiative, following WFP program guidelines for their activities in “Productive Assets and Livelihoods Support,”⁷⁴ were designed to “support the sustainable creation of community assets and at the same time provide off-season income-generation during the annual lean season.”⁷⁵ The WFP initiatives fit neatly into the outline cited above in which ‘rural infrastructure’ and ‘labor demand’ were high priorities. It also hauntingly echoes the words from a colonial-era journal on the subject of railroad building quoted by Rudolf Mrázek, which reads,

the population can do the earth-moving and stone-crushing work for the railway free of charge or, at worst, it can be paid in rice and salt, as this can be made a part of a usual *corvée* service for the government . . . it is evident that the costs will be even more affordable than those in either Europe or America.⁷⁶

It is significant that the road builders were not the intended beneficiaries of the road itself. For the builders, the road was important as a means of subsistence and marginally as a means of picturing themselves connected to the kind of better life first promised by the French empire, partially realized during Sihanouk’s Sangkum, violently dismantled during Democratic Kampuchea, and coming now again into view in the current era. One young man told me, “*For me, it’s easier to cut the road than to take the road around. But*

⁷⁴ WFP, *WFP Activities in Cambodia*.

⁷⁵ I was unable to speak with representatives from the WFP during my fieldwork of 2010-12. At that time, I checked their website and found no mention of a program that matched the one instigated in Sambok Dung. In June of 2013 the website describes this program and another pilot program not yet in Cambodia that they call “Purchase for Progress (P4P)” through which the WFP, “support farmers to produce food surpluses and sell them at a fair price. . . . By raising farmers’ incomes, P4P turns WFP’s local procurement into a vital tool to address hunger” WFP, “Purchase for Progress,” <http://www.wfp.org/purchase-progress/overview> (accessed June, 2, 2013). Implicit in this goal is the notion that raising income is the best way to address hunger: a slippery dialectic in which cash becomes food. I am reminded of a story told by U Sam Ouer of the Chinese merchant who evacuated Phnom Penh in the long line of people moving ahead of the Khmer Rouge forces. The man carried only a large sack of money in his car and was confident in his ability to survive the adventure. Ouer saw the man again days later, sitting at the water’s edge in utter dejection tossing his worthless bills into the river where he also tossed himself. U Sam Ouer with Ken McCullough, *Crossing Three Wildernesses: A Memoir* (Minneapolis: Coffee House Press, 2005).

⁷⁶ Mrázek, *Engineers of Happy Land: Technology and Nationalism in a Colony*, p. 5

the improvement is good, Cambodia needs roads to develop and be prosperous and I need rice to feed my family through the rainy season."⁷⁷

One unintended effect of the WFP Productive Assets and Livelihoods Support project was to make darker the line that divides the rich from the poor in this region, a line upon which t̃a Chen made his mark when he refused to raise the road himself and had to be forced to pay his neighbors. Class relations in Sambok Dung are delicately negotiated; all who live here attest to poverty and are indeed far from the infrastructure that makes for a life of smoothness and ease. The wife of the powerful and well-connected Gendarme quoted in chapter 1 makes clear that even with money there is no access to doctors and other services that have come to define modern life. Nonetheless, the age-old ways of defining class: land, buffalo, religious donations, home construction, or vehicles remain important and everyone knows who is poor and who is not. The contours of this road building project provided another avenue through which to discover and mark class difference. The project also provided an avenue through which to prepare villagers for alienated labor processes in which the value of road building is equal to rice and not to roads.

State power is enhanced through the current wave of international development initiatives bringing the empire of capital back to Cambodia. Interestingly however, and especially visible at the furthest reaches of development, the forces of the state are rendered unmistakably fragile. The promise of development is tenuous, and riders of the makeshift and dangerous *norries* are lightly haunted by the displacement to come when the empire takes back its rails and with it the

⁷⁷ This sentiment was also recorded in Laos in 1999 where the externally funded roads primarily affected 'off-farm' activities, but not the daily activities of getting water and fuel for household needs. See, Ing-Britt Trankell, *On the Road in Laos: An Anthropological Study of Road Construction and Rural Communities* (Uppsala, Sweden: Dept. of Cultural Anthropology, Uppsala University, 1993), pp. 81-4.

much desired market access that currently supports the families of small charcoal producers and forest gatherers. Further, the jobs created by the ELCs to support local families pay barely enough to feed the worker and the roads built by the company do not benefit people as promised. The material effects are also fragile, and provincial roads are built, but cannot be maintained or built and cannot be finished. This does not, however, make the state undesirable. On the contrary, rumors of new roads continue to enliven local gossip, even as the old new roads disintegrate further each year.

The high-speed railway to come is inherently good as it will connect Cambodia to the entire region, even though local livelihoods will be displaced. Development is desired, as is a state that can provide good governance. The expense of such luxuries, however, is more than the Kingdom of Cambodia can currently muster. When the Commune Chief has a salary equal to that of a migrant laborer, he will follow the *khsae* to kickbacks and side deals. When the red roads must be filled, groomed, and leveled—as they must *each year* in order to maintain their smooth, speed-enhancing character—the provincial budget is stretched beyond capacity. The difficulty of travel in this region, especially over roads that were wide and smooth in recent memory makes visible the delicate grip of empire.

The deterioration of state built roadways also brings into view the stability of the constantly shifting trails that remain in the region. One man remarked to me,

this road is difficult, but it is here, in the earth. It doesn't really change much from year to year. Season to season it changes, but it's the same from year to year. The red road is easy at first, but when the rain comes, it takes the road with it: the holes are deeper and it changes harder each year until we can't even use it and we just cut the road.

There is stability in the shifting trails and cart paths that wind through the mountains and cut across the roads raised by the state. These trails were made with intention and are directed

toward destinations of both subsistence and market, in that way they differ from those made by Ingold's wayfarer, unconcerned with destination. Nonetheless, they are, as Ingold suggests, "a cumulative trace, not so much engineered in advance as generated in the course of ...movement."⁷⁸ The movers in the interstitial zone of Sambok Dung are going somewhere with intentions of cultivating, gathering, and engaging the market to the best of their capacity. The soft trails of this place react to all of these activities and through the persistent movement of individuals through space an agreement of dwelling is reached.

⁷⁸ Ibid., p. S127.

`Anak Tā: Articulating the boundaries

All the royal acts are only agreed by the villagers through the establishment of the neak ta (village ancestors) before which all legal and land related actions take place...¹

The spirits are connected to Buddhism because we use the tools and the language of Buddhism to talk to the spirits, but they are different—they are older. They come from the time before and we need to communicate with them, but the only language we know now comes from Buddhism...²

The previous chapter discussed the interaction between trail making, road building, and the social projects that bring both into being. It is through the persistent colliding and accommodating movement of individuals through space that an agreement of dwelling is reached. Feet and wheels carve grooves in the earth; this is not just movement, but also appropriation and encounter. The agreement of dwelling goes deeper than arrangements between neighbors and state agents. There are powerful agents in the Cambodian landscape with which dwelling agreements must also be reached. This chapter will introduce those agents and discuss their social positions in the neighborhoods of Sambok Dung and in the political, religious, and economic fields of modern Cambodia.

At the turn of the twenty-first century in the Kingdom of Cambodia people acknowledge and engage a wide variety of non-human and often invisible social actors.³ In this chapter, I will discuss only the most ubiquitous of these: a tutelary, territorial spirit known in Khmer as *`anak tā*, pronounced neak ta and meaning honored grandfather, and as *mcâs dyk mcâs tī*, pronounced maja tuk maja day and meaning owner of the water and the land.⁴ This spirit is acknowledged throughout Southeast Asia, India, and China as the

¹ Ang, Chouléan, “La Communauté Rurale Khmère du Point de Vue du Sacré,” *Journal Asiatique*, 278:1-2 (1990) p. 140.

² Village woman, 21 years.

³ The great variety of ways that my friends in Sambok Dung engaged with and encountered non-corporal entities in their daily lives cannot be fully explored here. This chapter will introduce the *`anak tā*, only one of the many types of spirits I met during my time with them.

⁴ The term, *tā* means grandfather, and *`anak*, pronounced neak, is variously used: it means ‘person’ and is also used as the pronoun ‘you’; the impersonal pronoun ‘you’ is rarely used in Cambodia, but as ‘person’ one would say *`anak boek lān*, which translates literally as ‘person who drives the car’ or driver. It can be a formal term of address on par with *lok*, which means ‘honorable’ in an often gender neutral way or in a gendered way to imply ‘sir or mister’: *`anak grū* is used to refer to a female teacher and *lok grū* refers to a

owner of the land; Paul Mus speculates it was “common at one time to the various parts of monsoon Asia”, constituting a universally recognized early “form of religion.”⁵ I will critique the ontological category of ‘religion’ below in light of the rituals and stories that surround *`anak tā* and the *mcās dṃk mcās ṭī*, but Mus also suggests that this spirit is a manifestation, a “divinization”, of the productive “energies of the soil”.⁶ This later point resonates with the ways my interlocutors described their social relationships with the spirit that is the owner of the water and the land and gathers together the bridge-like qualities of the term *pāramī* discussed in Chapter 1.

In conjunction with stories of related entities recounted in the regional literature, I will present here a historically particular picture of a spirit entity that is particular to neither the historical nor spatial circumstances that inform the stories I will tell. My interlocutors told stories and enacted rituals to cultivate their relationship with *`anak tā* and the *mcās dṃk mcās ṭī* that mark out a particular frontier between the interacting subjects of land, spirit (energy), and human. The spirit of the soil founds space and the stories and rituals that surround it are often referred to as “Founder’s Cults.”⁷ Michel de Certeau suggests that stories also found space: they animate objects into historical subjects through “narrative contracts”; they establish, displace, and transcend the limits of possibilities, marking a point of mediation and creating “a border only by saying what

male teacher, but *lok tā* is grandfather and *lok yāy* is grandmother; I was often addressed as *`anak mīng* which could translate as honorable aunt. But, when used to refer to a spirit, it does not translate as ‘person grandfather’, the term ‘respected grandfather’ would be more accurate, in a recent PhD dissertation, Lisa Arensen suggests the literal translation: the old ones. She uses the grandparent designation and the person form of *`anak*. Lisa J. Arensen, “Making the Srok: Resettling a Mined Landscape in Northwest Cambodia,” The University of Edinburgh. There is some speculation that the term *`anak tā* is an externally applied term rather than a locally generated one (etic rather than emic). That suggestion did not bear out in my research. In Sambok Dung, when the spirit was referred to in the abstract, they used the term *`anak tā*. However, when addressed personally the common form is *lok tā* or *lok yāy* which would translate as honorable grandfather/ honorable grandmother. In this configuration, *Lok Tā Bṃng Kamṇáp* is the *`anak tā*.

⁵ Paul Mus, *India seen from the East: Indian and Indigenous Cults in Champa* (Clayton, Vic.: Centre of Southeast Asian Studies, Monash University, 1975), p. 10.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Nicola Beth Tannenbaum and Cornelia Ann Kammerer, *Founders' Cults in Southeast Asia: Ancestors, Polity, and Identity* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2003).

crosses it.”⁸ The stories surrounding *`anak tã* awaken the productive ‘energies of the soil’ and animate them. They make possible the “isolation and interplay of distinct spaces... organized by the determination of frontiers”.⁹ This is a political act that founds space and defines communities, but the frontier is not an edge, it is rather, like the bridge, a gathering. It “welds together and opposes insularities” in ways that present the other to the self, inside but on the other side.¹⁰

The bridge marks a contact zone, in which the insecurities of empire are visible through the “obsessive need” to present and re-present the other as always the other and to repress the reciprocity inherent in hierarchy.¹¹ The spirit marks a zone of obfuscation. Scholars of the modern period have only recently ceased to wonder how spirit beliefs can continue in the face of rational science and universal religions; their inquiries haunted by equally incomplete kingly appropriations of spirit power and territory. The haunting marks a particular grammar of empire and the universal religions that attend its spread. In this chapter, I will attend to both the communications and separations created at the frontier where *`anak tã* emerges and to the border marking work engendered by the owner of the water and the land. I trace its trajectory through the social landscape of Sambok Dung and through a historical and regional perspective.

I argue that engagements with the owner of the water and the land are neither religion nor religious. Rather, they are the Other that emerges through the repression of the violence of appropriation that sits at the heart of empire and is obscured through classification. *`Anak tã* and local relationships with *mcãs dyk mcãs tĩ* hold elements of what we today refer to as the religious, but they also define the social categories of the political, and the economic. The juridical, material, and spiritual aspects of spirit relationships occur between human and non-human agentive actors forming social

⁸ Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), pp. 122-3.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid. p. 128.

¹¹ Mary Louise Pratt, *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation* (London; New York: Routledge, 2008).

relationships that extend into all other forms of sociality: with neighbors, with government officials, with monks, and with material objects. By attending to spirit stories from Sambok Dung and Southeast Asia more broadly, as well as stories of kingship and colonial enterprise that embroil the spirit and attempt to define ‘religion’, I contribute to the reexamination and critique of the ontological category of religion.

The story animates the subjects on both sides of this relationship; it defines the contours of self and other, of subject and object, and of sovereignty and submission that congeal around its frontier. I begin this circumambulation by describing the stories of first encounters with *`anak tã* and *mcâs dyk mcâs fĩ* in Sambok Dung and relate how these encounters speak to others regionally, both contemporary and historical. Interspersed with these stories, I engage with the theoretical aspects of the literature on spirits of the land in Southeast Asia through an examination of the contact zone where the owner of the water and the land is classified into the ontological category of religion. Going away from my ethnographic data, I will discuss the political relationships cultivated with the owner of the water and the land historically and in Cambodia’s contemporary political landscape. Returning to Sambok Dung, I attend to the boundary crossing social relationships of the honored grandfathers, showing how they cultivate ties with the local authorities of temple and state. I conclude with a discussion of the irreducibility of the ubiquitous presence of the owner of the water and the land to the contemporary social categories of politics, economics, and least of all religion. I begin in the village where, perhaps not coincidentally, encountering this spirit was my first event.

Meeting the Spirit

It was late afternoon when I finally made it to the village to begin my fieldwork. I went directly to the home of the family I arranged to live with, unloaded my bits of stuff, and then went downstairs to meet the neighbors gathering under the house. Yāy Som (grandmother Som) is the matron of this house and one of many sources of information

and confidence during my stay; when I descended the stairs she stopped what she was doing to introduce me to everyone. Once I was situated, she went back to packing her basket while I got acquainted. When she was done, she announced that she was taking me to meet *lok tā*. They all nodded and waved us off, returning to their conversation about the rice and the rain. The woman who lived right next door, *yāy Go*, came along with us and Som's 3-year old grandson, *Yute*. We walked down the road about twenty paces and turned onto a cart path, which we followed for a few yards, and turned again onto a trail that ran along the edge of the fallow rice fields.

Som walked briskly along the trail, the rest of us followed behind. While we walked I asked *yāy Go* about our little outing: starting with, who is *lok tā*? *He's the `anak tā*, she answered. *Lok tā Býng Kamṇáp. He protects all of us in this place and we need to tell him you're here, so he will protect you, too. You don't know our ways and we don't want him to be angry if you do something wrong!* Something wrong? *Go* chuckled at my discomfort and grabbed me around the shoulders. *Don't worry little sister*, she said. *Lok tā just likes to know who's here!* The possible transgressions against the delicate sensibilities of the *`anak tā* will be discussed below, the point I want to make here is the way that engagements with spirits are at once important encounters with social and physical ramifications—like possible illness or death delivered at the whim of the spirit, and banal everyday events—no one at the house considered it terribly important that we were going to visit *lok tā* and they just waved us along. A meeting with the *`anak tā* was my first 'event' in Sambok Dung and when we arrived at the hut of the spirit (Photo 3a) Som set down her basket and proceeded to arrange the offerings (Photo 3b). When she had everything prepared,¹² she lit one large and two small candles inside the hut and from the large candle she lit fifteen incense sticks, five for each of us three women in attendance. *Yute*, passed out the burning incense sticks and Som said this prayer:

¹² She gave the spirit tobacco wrapped in *mlū* (betel leaves), a chicken neck (part of the special dinner that was being prepared back at the house), green tea (this spirit also drinks wine, but *Yāy Som* does not!), and some *mān* fruit (referred to as longan fruit in English).

Lok tā, please give us good health and happiness [sukh sappāy] and keep misfortune [upadrab] from us. Lok tā, protect my daughter and son-in-law, who are on the road traveling here now, and keep us all in the house safe and happy. Especially younger sister Courtney who came here from far away, protect her like one of our siblings and guide her study of Buddhism. Bring us happiness, lok tā, we honor you and have brought you chicken, fruit, and tea. We, your grandchildren, pray for prosperity (loek rāsī), lok tā, myself, grandmother Go, and Ms Courtney. We make these offerings to you so you will be happy and will keep us all healthy.

It was important that we go to visit *lok tā* and get me situated in the village first thing.

When we went back to the house, the food was ready and we all sat down to a feast of chicken with sweet sauce, fresh greens, and rice. When the food was served, Som took a few fingers full of each dish on a spoon and carried them over to the hut for the *mcās dyk mcās ī* in front of the house (Photo 3c) and put the food in the little bowls: no prayer, no incense, and no special gesture save placing the food.

During dinner, I asked about *lok tā*. The people who sat around the food were all first generation inhabitants of the region and I wanted to know why they built the *khdam*¹³ at that particular place. The obviousness of the answer in local terms rendered the question esoteric and obscure. In response, my companions invoked the palpable power of the spirit the place. Tā Dum said, “*you can feel the spirit [pāramī] when you walk there, it makes the hair stand on my arms!*”¹⁴ Others told stories of miraculous healings, of water buffalo lost and found, and of streaking light traveling at certain times toward Phnam Tā `Aū or toward the forest. All these stories confirmed the presence of the spirit and are consistent with broader regional interpretations of this entity’s attributes.¹⁵ During this conversation, I learned the story of *Lok Tā Byng Kamṇáp*¹⁶ and

¹³ This word translates literally as hut. It refers both to the impermanent structures built in the forest and fields for sheltered rest and short-term living, and the small structures that house spirit representations and offerings.

¹⁴ When I first translated this conversation into my notebooks, I translated *pāramī* as power, which was how I understood it at the time. I can see now, that my friend was saying that one can feel the spirit, called *pāramī*. The spirit gathers the perfection of the dhamma and the power of the Buddha into the fresh-water spring at the base of the tall tree on the edge of the rice field.

¹⁵ Alain Forest, *Le Culte Des Génies Protecteurs Au Cambodge: Analyse Et Traduction d'Un Corpus De Textes Sur Les Neak Ta* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 1992), p. 35; Đỗ, Thiện, *Vietnamese Supernaturalism: Views from the Southern Region* (London; New York: RoutledgeCurzon, 2003), p. 5; John Holt, *Spirits of the Place: Buddhism and Lao Religious Culture* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2009), p. 45.

the local history of spatial production at his site,¹⁷ but nothing of how people knew there was a spirit at that particular spot. For all my interlocutors the spirit was already part of village social life when they arrived. It was months later that I met yāy Ren, who remembered when they built the first *khdam* for *lok tā*. She told me:

The spirit told tā Nao to come and make offerings... it was in a dream ... we were clearing fields and fighting wild pigs then; the place was nothing but forest [suddh tae brai]. Tā Nao told us about the dream, with the fresh water spring and the spirit of the lake. No one here knew, so we went to ask the fortune teller's advice.¹⁸ Then we came to make offerings at this place where the water spreads from the roots of the tree. Later we built a khdam next to the tree and you can see we keep improving [cam roen] the space.

All the other stories I eventually collected concerning the way villagers became aware of the three named and propitiated *`anak tā* in Sambok Dung involved dreams of the spirit.

Lok Tā `Aū *Grandfather Flowing Water*, the spirit at the base of Phnam Tā `Aū, entered the dreams of a young woman wishing for a baby. The spirit told her where to bring her offerings and she became pregnant after finding the place and bringing meat and rice. Tā Gam Yāy Dā, *Grandfather Revenge and Grandmother Duck*, came to tā Reut in a dream and informed him of their presence and their loneliness. They were under the tallest tree in the field and they missed the singing and dancing of the past: they requested a house and a party.

¹⁶ This is the story: the spirit of this lake caused gold and silver to rise from the water and all who came to collect the riches received an equal share. People settled in this area; they began to grow rice and to raise families and they honored the spirit who provided their wealth. Then one powerful man desired the treasure of his neighbor and stole his gold. The success of this greedy man inspired other powerful people to overrun their neighbors, stealing their treasure. This made the spirit angry and all the gold and silver once provided freely sank to the bottom of the lake. I am told that these attributes can be found among many *`anak tā* associated with lakes around Cambodia.

¹⁷ In Photo 3a there are three generations of *khdam* for the spirit, not visible is a concrete retaining wall for the spring around the roots of the tree, which used to be a swampy area, and a concrete slab with support beams and a wooden roof where the monks are seated during *loeng `anak tā* ceremonies, which will be discussed more fully below.

¹⁸ The translation of 'fortune teller' is somewhat limiting. The Khmer term is *krū dāy*, does imply prediction and the advice of this specialist is solicited to find auspicious dates for important events, for reading cards, but also for interpreting dreams and the qualities of non-corporeal entities.

These origin stories emerged through the course of my stay in the village and were not known by all who engaged with the spirits: I had to actively seek them. The small household huts in everyone's yards had no such origin stories, but many people recounted erecting them as part of their settlement process. One woman laughed when she told me about the family's arrival. She said, "*We came here in 2002. We were so poor... and we just started working; we couldn't build a house so we just built a khdam. Actually, we built two: one for us and one for mcâs ḍȳk mcâs t̄i! Then we cleared the land.*" This scenario, in which a place is designated and offerings made to the owner of the land either before or in conjunction with settlement is consistent with stories from around the region.

Yukio Hayashi has done extensive work in Isan among the Thai-Lao, for whom "the establishment of the village by *chap chong* and the establishment of the shrine-like building for the guardian spirit are inseparable."¹⁹ The term *chap chong* refers to forest clearing. In Khmer they say *kâp gâs* to refer to the same process. There is a little contact zone here in which the ubiquitous huts outside of Khmer homes were founded with an intent similar to the establishment of a guardian spirit shrine among the Thai-Lao. Both acts express the understood presence of an owner of the water and the land and the idea that the power of the people who live on the land is "realized by respecting divine agency and design."²⁰ It may be significant, or worth further inquiry, that the 'shrine-like buildings' for the *`anak t̄a* of Sambok Dung were not part of *kâp gâs* like those for the Thai-Lao village guardian spirit, only the individual household huts. The Khmer did not come as a group, but as individual families. The larger shrines were not erected until the spirits made themselves known to the new inhabitants of the region through dream visitations.

¹⁹ Yukio Hayashi, *Practical Buddhism among the Thai-Lao: Religion in the Making of Region* (Kyoto, Japan: Kyoto University Press, 2003), p. 184.

²⁰ This idea comes from villagers in Laos, quoted by Holt, *Spirits of the Place: Buddhism and Lao Religious Culture*, p. 36.

The point I want to make here, and to which I will return, is that the spirit hut in front of the homes of Sambok Dung is associated with the owner of the water and the land and when people came to this place to *kâp gâs* the land and make homesteads they first made a place to acknowledge the original owner and to respect the power of that energy.²¹ From this original position of respect that signals dwelling rather than trespass, subsistence rather than appropriation, the newcomer to the region engages the productive energy of the land, beginning the story through which they become known to the yet unknown forest spirits, renowned for their malevolence and caprice. Mĩng Trē, who arrived in 2001 with her husband and two young sons, expressed an oft repeated sentiment when she said:

The spirits of the forest are only dangerous when we are careless with words and greedy in deeds. We built the khdam first; we made offerings and asked permission. Please let us stay here, we said. We are only poor, we don't come to defeat [s'ē t̃ac], only to raise our children.

These propitiations to the owner of the water and the land are specific to the work of *kâp gâs* and to carving a human space out of the forest. Such actions, embedded with promises of caretaking and careful use are encountered in Cambodia, in a recent dissertation by Lisa Arensen who lived with villagers cutting fields from the forest in the heavily-mined northwestern regions,²² in the Thai-Lao context described by Hayashi above, and among highlanders in Vietnam. Georges Condominas recorded this blessing after the rite to burn the forest,

*Let us eat of pork without eating to excess
Let us eat of the buffalo without eating for no reason
Let us kill the chicken without killing for no reason.*²³

²¹ Because the inhabitants of this village came from many regions in the country, there were a few different ways of referring to the spirit honored with offerings at the home hut: *mcâs d̃ỹk mcâs t̃i* owner of the water and the land, interchanged with *lok t̃ā*, and *`anak t̃ā*, were the most commonly used. But I also heard people use *brah̃ bhūmi* village god (deity), *Me Pa* mother and father (ancestors associated with Chinese origins), and *devatā* a celestial being associated with Buddhist and Hindu cosmology.

²² Arensen, *Making the Srok: Resettling a Mined Landscape in Northwest Cambodia*, p. 121.

²³ Georges Condominas, *We have Eaten the Forest: The Story of a Montagnard Village in the Central Highlands of Vietnam* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1977), p. 206.

The Cambodian literature does not make explicit the connection between the *`anak tā* and the *mcās dyk mcās tī*, focusing instead on the role of village founder or protective ancestor spirit that articulates the space between forest and village.²⁴ In this capacity the spirit of the land is engaged by a human, typically a husband and wife team, that has come to clear a space from the forest and is powerful and moral enough to sustain a relationship with the spirit. After death, a shrine is built to honor them as ancestors and guardians of the village; similar scenarios are recounted by Yoko Hayami among the Karen.²⁵ Mīng Trē's invocation pushes the Khmer *`anak tā* closer to the conceptions of the highland shifting agriculturalists noted above and also resonates with Valerio Valeri's description of Huaulu hunters from the on the island of Seram in Indonesia:

There is no notion in Huaulu of a socially guaranteed free access to what is owned, of a right of use and abuse. One always owns as part owner, as part of a superior ownership; one is forever an interloper or at best a tenant... [and] must always strike a deal, pay a price for using land...²⁶

The Huaulu are not agriculturalists, they are hunters, and their symbolic relationship to the lord of the land is quite different than the Khmer rice farmers I know or the stories of highland swiddeners. Among the Huaulu, the owner of the land preys on the humans just as the humans prey on forest game in a relationship that entails death on both sides and the tacit agreement for mutual restraint. For mīng Trī, the deal that was struck with the owner of the land contains a promise of respect and of restraint, the term, *s'ē t̄ac* suggests

²⁴ Chouléan Ang, *Les Êtres Surnaturels Dans La Religion Populaire Khmère* (Paris: Cedorek, 1986), p. 205; Forest, *Le Culte Des Génies Protecteurs Au Cambodge: Analyse Et Traduction d'Un Corpus De Textes Sur Les Neak Ta*, p. 22; Buddhasāsana Paṇḍity, "Prajum Ryañ Breñ Khmaer." *Buddhist Institute: Phnom Penh, Cambodia* 8 (1989); Etienne Aymonier, *Notes Sur Les Coutumes Et Croyances Superstitieuses Des Cambodgiens* (Paris: Cedoreck, 1984[1900]). Certain authors make specific reference to the antiquity of these ancestors in order to distinguish them from familial ancestors that live in the memory of individuals and are honored inside the home. See notably, Leclère, Adhémar, *Le Bouddhisme Au Cambodge*. (Paris: E. Leroux, 1899), p. 150; Eveline Porée-Maspero, *Étude Sur Les Rites Agraires Des Cambodgiens*. (Paris: Mouton, 1962), p. 6; Miac P"uññ, *Kamrang Aekasār Sī pī Prabaenī Ning Daṃniamdamláb Khmaer*, Vol. 1 (Bnam Bheñ: Buddhasāsanapaṇḍity, 1999), p. 186.

²⁵ Yoko Hayami, "The Decline of Founders' Cults and Changing Configurations of Power: Village and Forest among Karen in the Thai State," in *Founders' Cults in Southeast Asia: Ancestors, Polity, and Identity*, eds. N. Tannenbaum and C. A. Kammerer, Monograph 52 ed. (New Haven: Yale University Southeast Asia Studies, 2003), p. 139.

²⁶ Valerio Valeri, *The Forest of Taboos: Morality, Hunting, and Identity among the Huaulu of the Moluccas* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2000), p. 308.

defeat, but this is defeat by eating in a lowly fashion, *s'ē*, the very last bit, *tāc*. I will continue to expand upon the sentiment of contingent ownership understood in an idiom of restraint that establishes the terms of use through an understanding of mutual subsistence; it manifests importantly here in very dissimilar contexts of use. The Huaulu hunt game and are in turn hunted by their lord of the land.

In Cambodia, and among other Southeast Asian agriculturalists, the owners of the land are associated with the work of subsistence and agriculture. In this idiom, the owner of the land sustains or preys upon the tenant farmers through providing or withholding the rains, through sustaining or subverting physical health, and through demands placed to facilitate communal relationships, all of which are essential to wet-rice agriculture. The named and spatially situated *`anak tā* of Sambok Dung were not engaged as owners of the water and the land to whom one pays a certain price. The large community offerings, are for the *`anak tā* who are protective and capricious arbiters of rainfall, good health, and sociality.²⁷ They could be counted on to help if they were happy, and their happiness was contingent upon lavish parties and good behavior.

I was in the village for many months before the relationship between the *`anak tā* and the *mcās dyk mcās tī* was made clear to me. It happened one day when Som remarked that the next day they would move the *khdam* for the *`anak tā*. I was shocked that such an undertaking would be communicated with this casual air—no preparation, no ceremony, no *chaey'am*.²⁸ When I questioned her, she laughed at me and said, “No! We’re not moving *lok tā*, just the *khdam* here at the house.” I told her that I thought the *khdam* at

²⁷ The familial language of grandfather and grandmother used with the spirits is reciprocated and all interlocutors with spirits become grandchildren. Yāy Som used this language above and see also, Erik W. Davis, “Khmer Spirits, Chinese Bodies: Chinese Spirit Mediums and Spirit Possession Rituals in Contemporary Cambodia,” in *Faith in the Future: Understanding the Revitalization of Religions and Cultural Traditions in Asia*, eds. Thomas Reuter and Alexander Horstmann (Leiden: BRILL, 2012).

²⁸ The *chaey'am* is a long drum and is typically played in a troupe, with a singer and gong player. In Sambok Dung, the troupe consisted of 4 to 5 drummers and one singer who also played the gong. They were sometimes accompanied by a *tra* player (a two stringed instrument played with a bow). This troupe, whose members all came from Sambok Dung, crossed all kinds of boundaries. As musicians were in short supply in this rural area, they performed at rites that ‘should’ have had more traditional instruments and traveled to celebrations at neighboring temples and spirit shrines, they performed at weddings, at Buddhist ceremonies and at all the *loeng`anak tā* celebrations.

the house was for the *mcâs dyk mcâs fī* and she laughed again, shaking her head in dismay at my ignorance.

They are all `anak tã. Lok Tã Bỳng Kamṇáp comes from the mcâs dyk mcâs fī. Mcâs dyk mcâs fī is the biggest... it is in everything and we can ask this spirit for protection and help from many places—like our houses. But we don't always know the names of the spirits right around our house, they aren't big and powerful like lok tã, but they are all connected and are all mcâs dyk mcâs fī.

Som describes here how the owner of the water and the land has multiple manifestations, its power is everywhere accessible via the *khdam* in front of each house.²⁹ In Sambok Dung the first two benefits provided or thwarted by the spirit, rain and health, were widely acknowledged. People hold annual celebrations to honor the spirit who provides the rain and they adhere to certain codes of conduct to ensure their own continued good health.

In addition to being greedy and careless with speech, another way to anger the spirit is to bicker, to badmouth one another, or to be argumentative. No one explicitly mentioned group solidarity as something desired by the spirit, but this aspect of sociality is certainly a part of the rites and restrictions that surround the owner of the water and the land. In Sulawesi, Lorraine Aragon notes that the spirit of the land was more important in constituting kin groups and ritual associations than in founding territories or delineating villages.³⁰ This is similar to the Huaulu, whose concerns are also focused socially rather than territorially. In Cambodia the social relationships with *`anak tã* are understood in terms of territorial protection, but they are also familial relationships of mutual care. Erik Davis describes the adoptive paradigm through which humans enter into relationships with *`anak tã* as similar to the relationship between parents and children.³¹ He suggests

²⁹ I have also seen people set aside a finger full of rice on the ground when away from home, especially when eating in the forest.

³⁰ Lorraine C. Aragon, "Expanding Spiritual Territories: Owners of the Land, Missionization, and Migration in Central Sulawesi," in *Founders' Cults in Southeast Asia: Ancestors, Polity, and Identity*, eds. Nicola Beth Tannenbaum and Cornelia Ann Kammerer (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2003), p. 120.

³¹ Davis, *Khmer Spirits, Chinese Bodies: Chinese Spirit Mediums and Spirit Possession Rituals in Contemporary Cambodia*, p. 179.

that the spirit's power to harm and to heal is part of the morally and socially transformative relationship through which parents discipline children to properly inhabit their coming position as parents—a position that includes their elderly parents in multi-generational networks of care.

In Sambok Dung, not only does the spirit adopt all grandchildren in the territory, but also insists upon congeniality and sociality among them. Each *`anak tā* specifically requested sociality; in the case of Lok Tā `Aū, the initial offering by the barren young woman was followed in traditional fashion by a large celebration sponsored by her after she conceived. The other two spirits simply made themselves and their desires known: they both wanted parties and offerings. The spirits enjoy the celebrations and are pleased by the food, the music, and the dancing. During a conversation about the power of the spirit, yāy Grim told this story:

We had just cleared our first rice field when mīng Jorī called us to come loeng `anak tā. It was our first planting season; the others had been here longer, but we were happy for the celebration and to join the others to ask lok tā for a good harvest... We all made food and brought it to the spirit... tā Nang brought the chaey'am and after we ate everyone started dancing. I had never danced and didn't know how, but when they pulled me into the circle I knew just what to do. Hong too, [referring to her sister-in-law] she started dancing too. We just knew all the steps then, I had never done it, but I knew all the steps like I had always known them... we danced all together. We were so happy and danced into the night... It was like lok tā wanted us to dance, all of us... It was lok tā that taught us.

Eruptions of spontaneous dancing are just one of the many miracles attributed to this spirit; a spirit that requests acts of communal sociality to satisfy its own desires. The sense of *communitas* after a good party was never considered part of satisfying the desire of the spirit, perhaps because it lacks any typical hallmarks of sacrifice, but such clearly seems to be the case, especially in Grim's story of coerced dancing.

The human capacity to provide energy through ritual is at the service of the spirit, just as the child in their capacity to provide family labor and long-term care is at the service of the parent who sustains them, and like the Huauilu who are hunted by the spirit

that provides the game.³² The exploitative nature of this relationship does not go unnoticed,³³ but adhering to the spirit's demands is not really driven by fear and coerced obligation; it is well understood that miracles happen inside that dialectic of power. Relationships of unequal power embedded in an idiom of mutual care are constitutive of Khmer social organization and are considered to be ontologically transformative.

Theoretical Interlude

The owner of the water and the land seems to sit at the center of a number of ontological transformations across the region now known as Southeast Asia. Paul Mus, following Chinese sources, describes this territorial spirit of the land as a “divinization of the energies of the soil... [I]t is the fecundity latent in the earth, productive of fruits, harvests and cattle, which constitutes the real substance of the god of the soil.”³⁴ This description does fall in line with what I learned in Sambok Dung; the amorphous *mcās dyk mcās tī* is a part of all the water and the land, as Som suggests, “*it is in everything*,” just like the description of *pāramī* in Chapter 1. With the ethnographic details pulled out thus far, I show how energies latent in the soil remain an integral part of human subsistence and sociality in a region newly settled by low-land state-assimilated, Buddhist rice farmers.

Mus suggests that this spirit enacts a religious “stage between the primitive animism... and more scholarly religions.”³⁵ The notion that engagements with the owner of the water and the land represent a stage in human religious sensibilities headed ultimately toward the goal of scholarly religions is a story that founds spirit-space in the

³² There is an enactment of the cycle of birth, death, and rebirth that adheres to spirit rituals that deserves further unpacking in this context.

³³ The problem of spirit exploitation is especially remarked by spirit mediums, whose work with these demanding and powerful entities highlights the pain of transformation: see Didier Bertrand, “A Medium Possession Practice and its Relationship with Cambodia Buddhism: The *Grū Pāramī*,” in *History, Buddhism, and New Religious Movements in Cambodia*, eds. John A. Marston and Elizabeth Guthrie (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2004). Most Cambodian youths I know are deeply invested in their relationships with their parents, but I have spoken with educated urban youths who decry the exploitations suffered at the hands of their parents and the burdens of caring for them in their old age (fieldnotes 2008).

³⁴ Mus, *India seen from the East: Indian and Indigenous Cults in Champa*, pp. 10-11.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 12.

educated imagination. On this point, Mus was spouting the theoretical truths of his time: truths that are currently contested, but remain strong enough to warrant treatment here. I will then get back to the work of addressing the encounters and boundary crossings manifested by this something that is in everything.

Mus offers a subtle insight when he suggests that “[t]he locality itself is a god”.³⁶ This notion appears to be commonly held among many outside monsoon Asia as well.³⁷ The profundity of his insight, however, is lost a bit in his efforts at classification. He suggests that the divination of a locality cannot be understood as “pure and simple animism” and it therefore must represent some intermediary stage of development. Such an assumption relies on the notion that ‘religion’ is an ontological category that can be further divided into fields like animism, shamanism, Buddhism, or Christianity, each of which has definable and discrete attributes that change according to the development of society.

The challenge to this way of thinking began in the early 1980s with discussions of the hierarchal projects of colonialist domination that it obscured.³⁸ Its durability manifests in more recent and more poignant treatments that trace the social manufacture of the category of ‘religion’ and its attendant assumptions about secularity, social progress, and discrete attributes.³⁹ Talal Asad suggests that the theoretical search for an essence of religion, with which one could define it as either animism or Buddhism or as a stage

³⁶ Ibid. p. 11.

³⁷ Marisol de la Cadena, "Indigenous Cosmopolitics in the Andes: Conceptual Reflections Beyond 'Politics'," *Cultural Anthropology* 25, no. 2 (2010), 334-370. In this story, the mountains are divinities and political actors.

³⁸ Jonathan Z. Smith, *Imagining Religion: From Babylon to Jonestown* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982); Talal Asad, "Anthropological Conceptions of Religion: Reflections on Geertz," *Man* 18, no. 2 (1983), 237-259; McCutcheon, Russell T., *Manufacturing Religion: The Discourse on Sui Generis Religion and the Politics of Nostalgia*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997).

³⁹ Talal Asad, *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2003); Tomoko Masuzawa, *The Invention of World Religions, Or, how European Universalism was Preserved in the Language of Pluralism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005); Arnal, William E., McCutcheon, Russell T., *The Sacred is the Profane: The Political Nature of "Religion"* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013).

somewhere in-between, “invites us to separate it conceptually from the domain of power.”⁴⁰

The stories that found *`anak tā* do exactly the opposite, and invite the spirit into the agricultural cycle as the primary purveyor of power. This contact zone at the boundaries of contradictory stories goes deeper than the European empire of colonial expansion and will be explored more fully in the next section. Nonetheless, colonial separation of religion from power enacted through stories that coined the term religion as a domain separate from all other areas of study and of life is an acute point. The story that religion is *sui generis*: an abstract, essential, and homogeneous realm of universal human enactment of and belief in the ‘sacred’ or the ‘holy’ is what aligns the spirit to a manufactured ‘religion’ and distances it from its more political foundation.⁴¹

Studies of spirit traditions in Southeast Asia have suffered from this theoretical standpoint and focused attention on the ‘problem’ that spirit practices and some form of universal religion are often engaged by the same individual and in the same community. Stanley Tambiah successfully reworked earlier theoretical classifications that suggested two types of religion, the great tradition and the little tradition popular among scholars of religion.⁴² By jettisoning that notion, he was able to see that in Northern Thailand the spirit cults and Buddhism made up “one single field in contemporary life.” The importance of this insight for Tambiah was that it illuminated, “the historical processes by which Buddhism came to terms with indigenous religions in its march outwards from India.”⁴³ The deep-seated theoretical standpoint that ‘religion’ is a category that can be defined in terms of social progress lead the scholar to privilege the march of the ‘higher’

⁴⁰ Talal Asad, “The Construction of Religion as an Anthropological Category,” in *A Reader in the Anthropology of Religion*, ed. Michael Lambek, (2002), p. 116.

⁴¹ McCutcheon, Russell T., *Manufacturing Religion the Discourse on Sui Generis Religion and the Politics of Nostalgia*; Daniel L. Pals, “Is Religion a Sui Generis Phenomenon?” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 55, no. 2 (1987), 259-282.

⁴² Terence P. Day, *Great Tradition and Little Tradition in Theravāda Buddhist Studies* (Lewiston, N.Y., USA: Edwin Mellen Press, 1988).

⁴³ Stanley Jeyaraja Tambiah, *Buddhism and the Spirit Cults in North-East Thailand* (Oxford: Cambridge University Press, 1970), p. 377.

religion that was expected to replace the lower but was forced instead, to come to terms with it.

More recent scholarship of religion in Southeast Asia leaves behind the ‘problem’ of classification and address social engagements with divinities and spirits that cross textual and energetic fields, disrupting notions of ontological clarity.⁴⁴ Other scholars upset the notions of social progress embedded in the category of religion and their work turns Tambiah’s sentiment around to suggest that it is not the universal religion coming to terms with local traditions; rather it is local ontologies that shape the universal religion.⁴⁵ This last is in line with my experiences in Sambok Dung, but the religious and ‘supernatural’ element of spirit traditions remains at the forefront of most studies.

In Sambok Dung, local villagers live in a world in which social relationships of unequal power include humans and non-humans, visible and invisible, all of whom inhabit the natural world: there is no supernatural. In a discussion of the sacred vocabulary of the Khmer, Chouléan Ang and Severos Pou make clear from the start that among the Khmer, everyday understandings and vocabulary encompass both the visible human world and the largely invisible non-human world. As such, “the state of the actual human world cannot be explained without the proper understanding of the other-than-human world in all manifestations (thought, comportment, vocabulary, and creative expression).⁴⁶ There is no divide that separates human and other-than-human sociality.

This is not the world constructed by modern educational systems across the globe that privilege a view of the visible world and that considers human activity to be

⁴⁴ Fenella Cannell, *Power and Intimacy in the Christian Philippines* (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 1999); Pattana Kitiarsa, "Beyond Syncretism: Hybridization of Popular Religion in Contemporary Thailand," *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 36, no. 3 (2005), 461-487; Andrew C. Willford, *Cage of Freedom: Tamil Identity and the Ethnic Fetish in Malaysia* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2006); Rosalind C. Morris, "Giving Up Ghosts: Notes on Trauma and the Possibility of the Political from Southeast Asia," *Positions: East Asia Cultures Critique* 16, no. 1 (2008), 229-258.

⁴⁵ Justin Thomas McDaniel, *The Lovelorn Ghost and the Magical Monk: Practicing Buddhism in Modern Thailand* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011); Holt, *Spirits of the Place: Buddhism and Lao Religious Culture*; Hayashi, *Practical Buddhism among the Thai-Lao: Religion in the Making of Region*

⁴⁶ Pou, Saveros, Ang, Chouléan, "Le Vocabulaire Khmer Relatif Au Surnaturel." *Seksa Khmer* 10-13 (1987-90), p. 61. For a similar discussion see, A. Irving Hallowell, *Ojibwa Ontology, Behavior, and World View*, eds. Jennifer S. H. Brown and Susan Elaine Gray (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2010).

structurally and cognitively separate from all other energetic matter in that visible world.⁴⁷ There is an emerging contact zone in which these competing ontologies, one in which the human acts *upon* an inanimate nature and another in which the human interacts with an animated landscape, confront one another amid scholarly critique.⁴⁸ Mario Blaser uses the term “political ontology” to describe both the field of study that engages this contact zone and “the power-laden negotiations involved in bringing into being the entities that make up a particular world or ontology.”⁴⁹

The lowland, rice-farming Khmer villagers of Sambok Dung live in a world where the local spirits are powerful social interlocutors with whom relationships must be established, and just like the local police the *`anak tā* have connections to the nation’s prime minister and king, and just like the prime minister and king they have connections to Buddhism. The stories I have told thus far are stories of encounter: how I encountered *lok tā* on my first visit, how villagers in Sambok Dung and around Southeast Asia engage the *mcās dyk mcās tī*, and the stories of how the *`anak tā* made themselves known. I have another story of encounter with Khmer spirits from before my fieldwork at a newly constructed Buddhist temple in the United States. I tell this to illustrate some of the power-laden contours of a contact zone in the political ontology of contemporary Cambodia. The story is from the US, but the conversation was with a well-educated Buddhist monk recently brought to the temple from Phnom Penh. One day, I questioned the monk about the three little houses on poles erected around the temple by a member of the community. The monk did not approve of the little houses and told me dismissively

⁴⁷ Angel Rama and Chasteen, John Charles, *The Lettered City* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1996). For a similar discussion in not so recent anthropology see, Hallowell, *Ojibwa Ontology, Behavior, and World View*

⁴⁸ Philippe Descola and Gísli Pálsson, "Nature and Society: Anthropological Perspectives" Routledge, 1996); Donna Jeanne Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (New York: Routledge, 1991); Bruno Latour, *We have Never been Modern* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1993); Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, "Perspectival Anthropology and the Method of Controlled Equivocation," *Tipiti: Journal of the Society for the Anthropology of Lowland South America*. 2, no. 1:3 (2004), 22.

⁴⁹ Mario Blaser, "The Threat of the Yrmo: The Political Ontology of a Sustainable Hunting Program," *American Anthropologist* 111, no. 1 (2009), p.10.

that what the man was doing was not Buddhism. When I asked what it was, the monk described the spirit of the land to me. After much back and forth questioning about the non-existence of the spirit and the dreams that induced the man to build the huts, the monk said, “*It is not the spirit of the land he senses, it is ʈhāmabal.*” The term *ʈhāmabal*, comes from *pālī*, the language of Buddhist scripture, and was described to me as part of *iddhābal*, which, again from the *pālī*, is the boundless and unknowable power that makes up the universe. *Thāmabal* is different, however, because it can be known. The monk suggested that “*ʈhāmabal is iddhābal that is in this world with us. It is what scientists measure, what monks control in magic, and what villagers pray to for rain.*”⁵⁰

The monk invokes a political ontology that acknowledges the energetic power *in this world with us* that can be controlled by monks through ascetic and energetic practices. He personally understood such practice to be discouraged by the Buddha, but it was part of the known and the knowable landscape. The spirit as the owner of the land and a social entity, however, was the product of uneducated imaginations and should be banished. The monk objected to the spirit huts not because there was no power to address, but because that power was misunderstood by the ignorant man. I see this is a contact zone in which the multiple waves of empire that inhabit the stories of Cambodian Buddhism collide: the Buddhist world of nineteenth century Cambodia, the purified Buddhism of the twentieth century, and the secular landscape of the contemporary world are all at play in the monk’s discomfort with spirit agency and the dreams of the ignorant man.

In a similar vein, but a different political ontology, Paul Mus makes clear that the energy of the soil is brought into being through human action. He says

I believe that it is the activity of the sorcerers—their techniques of conjuring them up—which, more than anything else has peopled the

⁵⁰ Field notes, 2005. See also, Trude Jacobsen ‘Power and Political Culture in Cambodia’, co-authored with Martin Stuart-Fox. Submitted to the *Journal of Modern Asian Studies*, 16 June 2012.

sphere of human life with various spirits: in fact the spirits are seen not at all in isolation but always in relationship with man...⁵¹

As a scholar of Sanskrit and Southeast Asian Buddhism, Mus lives comfortably in the world invoked by the monk above in which powerful humans can conjure power and to this he adds the truth of a world in which the human is solely responsible for the existence of the spirit whose manifestation is “a means of gaining access to the soil as soil: a magical act of occupation...”⁵² I find Mus’ ontological articulations particularly interesting, because his insight is so deep for a scholar of his era and education, yet the anthropocentric world he was raised to inhabit slips in anyway.⁵³ Not in the intrusive way of Melford Spiro, who states “that belief in the existence of ... nats, is acquired by learning about them, rather than by experiences with them.”⁵⁴ Mus, on the other hand, suggests that “the ancestor is identified ‘entire with the god’ but the god may not be entire with the ancestor... The god in himself cannot die... But his materializations ‘die’ with the disappearance... of the human collectivity.”⁵⁵ Here, Mus allows space for the ontological possibility that soil is entity, but only viable insofar as it is associated with the human collective. I will suggest that soil as entity becomes associated with the human collective through the stories that found the frontier and make the other and the self mutually visible.

This is not to challenge the significance of the materialization that Mus invokes as a product of engagement with the human collective, only to suggest that human materialization of productive energy may not be the only thing going on. My point is not to prove or disprove the suggestion that divinized energies in the soil exist prior to human interaction or engage in social relationships with humans and non-humans alike. My

⁵¹ Mus, *India seen from the East: Indian and Indigenous Cults in Champa*, p. 10.

⁵² Ibid. p.24.

⁵³ It may be interesting to note that in the cosmology of Amerindians, all animals are descended from humans with whom they share a common spiritual essence regardless of their phenotypic expression. See Edwardo Viveiros de Castro, "Cosmologies: Perspectivism," *Hau Network of Ethnographic Theory* Masterclass Series 1 (2012), p. 57. This puts a nice spin on the notion of anthropocentrism.

⁵⁴ Melford E. Spiro, *Burmese Supernaturalism* (Philadelphia: Institute for the Study of Human Issues, 1978), p. 21.

⁵⁵ Mus, *India seen from the East: Indian and Indigenous Cults in Champa*, p. 16.

point here is to question the category of ‘religion’ to which the *`anak tā* is assigned and to point to some of the ways that category represents a world quite different than the world in which the human is not the only agentive force and all matter is infused with energy and a potential for intentional interaction. Not every rock or tree is available for intentional interactions, but the potential remains.

In one *`anak tā* story, a bodi tree was found growing in the middle of the forest and people made offerings to it as if it were *`anak tā*. When asked to identify itself it said, *we were not established in the shade of this tree, we know nothing of that... [we came] to get the attention of the people of this village and to show them how to comport themselves...*⁵⁶ The owner of the water and the land can manifest anywhere. Coming to *kâp gâs* the forest for homesteading is an aggressive engagement with the energy of the land and the interlopers make offerings to an unknown and diffuse power in the land, *mcâs dŷk mcâs fī*. The *`anak tā* is the concentration of that diffuse power. The human-spirit interaction recounted by my friends in Sambok Dung seems a bit different, however, from the divinization of the energies of soil described by Mus and recounted by Hayashi among the Thai-Lao. It seems backwards. The humans did not come to this place and build a shrine to the *mcâs dŷk mcâs fī* that would become the center of the village and would manifest the divinity of the energetic soil. Rather, the humans came to this place and made little offerings in acknowledgement of that power and later were called through dreams by the spirit to come and make offerings at a specific location.

There is a subtle boundary distinguished by interpolating spirits of the land who call their human interlocutors to come and expend energy with them, enacting, representing through ritual the cycle of birth and death that all engagements with the spirit entail. In only one of the *`anak tā* stories I read did the spirit invite the human in a dream to come to their particular location, this story is set in China and is called *The*

⁵⁶ Buddhasāsana Paṇḍity, *Prajum Rŷaṅ Breṅ Khmaer*, pp. 35-40; see also, Forest, *Le Culte Des Génies Protecteurs Au Cambodge: Analyse Et Traduction d'Un Corpus De Textes Sur Les Neak Ta*, pp.135-8.

*Origin of the 'Anak Tā.*⁵⁷ In it, the human receives a dream with detailed instructions of how to find the stone that is the spirit and is told to climb onto the stone and have their wish fulfilled. When the human finds the stone and climbs atop it, he turns to stone himself and then calls others to come. This resonates with the predator-prey relationship between humans and the owner of the water and the land that Valeri describes, a relationship often misunderstood as violent, one-sided, and unidirectional.

Among people who admit other-than-human actors in the world, the predator-prey relationship is often considered one of long-term reciprocity rather than a violent process enacted through force.⁵⁸ In the agricultural context, the long-term reciprocity between the humans and the owner of the water and the land is enacted through the *loeng 'anak tā* ceremony in which, Ang suggests, “villagers re-confirm their subordination to the spirit and the spirit’s agreement to provide protection and rains for them.”⁵⁹ The capricious and malevolent nature of the *'anak tā* underlies this hierarchal relationship of power and protection. It is a fraught relationship that at once grounds the cycle of life and death, of predator and prey, and opens to the uncanny possibility that protection is really only power. The *mcâs dyk mcâs tī* is at once everywhere at any time, and right here, right now; stories and sacrifice bring it into the human social world where it becomes embroiled in everyday acts of subsistence and extraordinary acts of appropriation.

'Anak tā with Kings and Politicians

Chouléan Ang notes that the *'anak tā* is the only spirit in Cambodia that has material form. In Sambok Dung, the spirit is represented in stone and also by anthropomorphic statue (photo 3d). Throughout Southeast Asia we find similar physical manifestations of

⁵⁷ Buddhasāsana Paṇḍity, *Prajum Ryañ Breñ Khmaer*, pp. 99-106.

⁵⁸ Paul Nadasdy, "The Gift in the Animal: The Ontology of Hunting and Human-Animal Sociality," *American Ethnologist* 34, no. 1 (2007), p. 25. In Nadasdy's story the rabbit enters the hunter's trap as part of this reciprocity.

⁵⁹ Ang, *Les Êtres Surnaturels Dans La Religion Populaire Khmère*, p. 77. Tim Ingold and Valeri both claim that the taboos and rituals of hunters are tied up in just this kind of reciprocal relationship, in which the spirit 'gives' the prey to the hunter. In this case, the spirit 'gives' good harvest in exchange for rituals, caretaking, and respect.

this spirit, which took the form of the linga when interpolated by kingly projects of territorial expansion. In addition to understanding the energetic nature of this spirit, Paul Mus also saw how its material representations and the social relationships it engendered were centers around which dynasties and laws flourished. In ancient ceremonies, Chinese lords pronounced the oath of allegiance before this god, materialized through stone and sacrifice: “[t]he stone gives reality to the communion of the god and of the group: it’s a contract.”⁶⁰ In the Chinese record, Mus finds debris from materialized deities tracing a map of the territories conquered by the emperor. The spirits were arranged in hierarchal fashion with the emperor on top wielding the power to appoint and dismiss local divinities.⁶¹

Mus’ great insight was to connect the emergence of dynastic enterprises in China that relied on engagements with spirits of the land to similar enactments with the same spirit in the contact zone of India’s Aryan invasion. The Indic record presents the same hierarchal arrangement of deities, except that the top of the hierarchy is not the divinized earthly emperor, but the sometimes-corporeal Indra. Mus suggests that what we today call Hinduism, “can be defined as a fixation of the Vedic gods by local tradition.”⁶² Ang tracked the contracts, inscribed in stone and written in royal chronicles, by which early Khmer kings expanded their territory. He found that the spirits existed in their vernacular form, named and inscribed at the top of lists that also named Indic deities. The spirit was not imposed upon the land by material representations of Brahmanic kingship; the owner of the water and the land was prior to the king, and the newcomer-king both pledged allegiance to and purchased territory from the spirit, in front of witnesses.⁶³ In Cambodia,

⁶⁰ Mus, *India seen from the East: Indian and Indigenous Cults in Champa*, p. 17

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, p. 19.

⁶² *Ibid.*, p. 28.

⁶³ Chouléan Ang, "Le Sol Et l'Ancêtre l'Amorphe Et l'Anthropomorphe," *Journal Asiatique* 283, no. 1 (1995), 213.; Chouléan Ang, "La Communauté Rurale Khmère Du Point De Vue Du Sacré," *Journal Asiatique* 278, no. 1-2 (1990).

the stone stelae that map the progress of ancient kings across the territory also record the king's association with the owner of the water and the land.⁶⁴

The territorial maps inscribed over locally powerful entities in Southeast Asia not only took the mandala forms recognized by Southeast Asian scholars,⁶⁵ but facilitated the creation of this political organization. Mus suggests that relationships with powerful localized deities, "paved the way for ... local materializations of king into territory."⁶⁶ This pattern of powerful earth-beings⁶⁷ organized into political hierarchal formations pointed toward the king at its center replicated itself through the various rising and falling empires of the early Southeast Asian kings.⁶⁸

The colonial empire also confronted the *`anak tã* and early French sources document the strong relationships between the *`anak tã* and Khmer administrative hierarchy. Anne Hansen describes a ceremony to appoint a new district governor that was performed in honor of the *`anak tã*, the ceremony could not be ignored by either Khmer or French officials because of popular demand and potential spirit anger.⁶⁹ Penny Edwards also notes that the first reorganization of the Cambodian political territory undertaken by the French, included ceremonies for the *`anak tã* which they hoped would

⁶⁴ David Chandler, "Maps for the Ancestors," in *Facing the Cambodian Past*, ed. David Chandler (Chiang Mai: Silkwood, 1978). A similar pattern is seen in South Asia with the marriage of the king to the local goddess.

⁶⁵ The mandala kingdom was a loosely bounded territory in which power emanated from the political center, which was physically and ritually modeled after mount Meru, the home of the gods. The king is at the top of the hierarchy, but is understood to be the top king among many and the offerings of tribute and slaves were contingent on both the power of the king and the contentment of the smaller kings. See, O. W. Wolters, *History, Culture, and Region in Southeast Asian Perspectives* (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 1982); Clifford Geertz, *Negara: The Theatre State in Nineteenth-Century Bali* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980).

⁶⁶ Mus, *India seen from the East: Indian and Indigenous Cults in Champa*, p. 44.

⁶⁷ Marison de la Cadena uses this term to describe mountains, rocks, rivers, with whom people in the Andes have social relationships. de la Cadena, *Indigenous Cosmopolitics in the Andes: Conceptual Reflections Beyond "Politics"*, 334-370.

⁶⁸ Tambiah, *Buddhism and the Spirit Cults in North-East Thailand*; Stanley J. Tambiah, *World Conqueror and World Renouncer* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976); Spiro, *Burmese Supernaturalism*; Holt, *Spirits of the Place: Buddhism and Lao Religious Culture*.

⁶⁹ Anne Ruth Hansen, *How to Behave: Buddhism and Modernity in Colonial Cambodia, 1860-1930* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2007), p. 112.

help tap into the deep connection between the territory, the monks, and the king.⁷⁰ The `anak tã, however, connect villages to kings, but also protect the territory from invading powers and some of the most famous and enduring `anak tã in Cambodia are those who protected the king and the territory from other kings.⁷¹ The most famous of these territory protecting `anak tã is Ghlāmng Mýang, who was a general for the Khmer king at Longveak and jumped to his death in order to lead a spirit army against the invading Siamese.

Ghlāmng Mýang remains an important figure in contemporary Cambodia. He is the presiding `anak tã over Pursat Province and is understood to control western Cambodia,⁷² he is also a possessing spirit for a medium in Long Beach, California,⁷³ and makes appearances in the mountains of both Pursat and Kompot.⁷⁴ During the recent skirmishes with the Thai over the temple at Preah Vihear, soldiers I met there told me that he jumped off very cliff where the temple sits in that ancient battle with the Thai. The soldiers also told me that the month before, his army of spirit soldiers inhabited a swarm of bees that attacked Thai soldiers attempting an ambush.⁷⁵ Every province in Cambodia has `anak tã, to whom, I am told, all local `anak tã report and for whom large annual celebrations are often organized.⁷⁶ None in Sambok Dung attended these provincial ceremonies and the importance of the provincial `anak tã was only mentioned by a few of my interlocutors, so an ethnographic investigation of the continuing salience

⁷⁰ Penny Edwards, *Cambodge the Cultivation of a Nation, 1860-1945* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2007), p. 170.

⁷¹ Leclère, Adhémar, *Le Bouddhisme Au Cambodge*, p. 154.

⁷² Yvonne Anne Guillou, "An Alternative Memory of the Khmer Rouge Genocide: The Dead of the Mass Graves and the Land Guardian Spirits [*Neak Ta*]," *South East Asia Research* 20 (2) (2012). At the temple at Preah Vihear where soldiers I met there in 2008 told me that he jumped off the cliff where the temple sits in that ancient battle with the Thai. The soldiers also told me that the month before his army of spirit soldiers inhabited a swarm of bees that attacked Thai soldiers attempting an ambush.

⁷³ Teri Saffer Yamada, "The Spirit Cult of Khleang Moeung in Long Beach, California," in *History, Buddhism, and New Religious Movements in Cambodia*, eds. John A. Marston and Elizabeth Guthrie (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2004).

⁷⁴ Eveline Porée-Maspero, "Traditions Orales De Pursat Et De Kampot," *Artibus Asiae* 24, no. 4 (1961), 394-398.

⁷⁵ Fieldnotes 2008.

⁷⁶ Sam Rith and Sebastian Strangio, "Villagers Curse Mondulkiri Plantation," *The Phnom Penh Post* 2009.

of the political hierarchy of the *`anak tã* remains to be done. Nonetheless, Ang finds the remains of the *linga* of the king still associated with *`anak tã* in temples at the royal capitals of Angkor, Longvaek, and Uṭungg,⁷⁷ the latter of which has been recently refurbished with large donations from Prime Minister Hun Sen.⁷⁸

Even though I cannot speak to the connection between the political hierarchy of *`anak tã* and the political hierarchy of the Cambodian government, they remain powerful figures in contemporary discourse across the political spectrum. I will give just a few interesting examples of how this manifests in the popular press. The first is the immortalization of Chutt Vutty, an anti-logging activist who was killed by military police. Shortly after the shooting, depictions circulated of Vutty returned as *`anak tã*, to protect the forest from government sponsored deforestation.⁷⁹ Vutty's death was not intended to manifest the power of the spirit, like the sacrifices of the Chinese emperor described by Mus, but this violent act did just that. The *`anak tã*, like Vutty are arbiters of justice and in the many demonstrations and protests against the injustices and destructions of economic intensification in Cambodia, *`anak tã* are often called upon to protect villagers from the encroaching companies.⁸⁰ Khmer officials invoke the spirits when taking political oaths of office,⁸¹ and the Cambodian courts continue to be presided over by well-known *`anak tã* before whom people are expected to be truthful. A powerful manifestation of this is the *`anak tã* statue erected in front of the Extraordinary Chambers of the Court of Cambodia (the Khmer Rouge tribunal).⁸² A recent, election-year invocation of the *`anak tã* in Cambodian politics was uttered by the current Prime

⁷⁷ Ang, *La Communauté Rurale Khmère Du Point De Vue Du Sacré*.

⁷⁸ Elizabeth Guthrie, "Buddhist Temples and Cambodian Politics," in *People and the 1998 National Elections in Cambodia: Their Voices, Roles and Impact on Democracy*, eds. John L. Vijghen and Caroline Hughes (Phnom Penh, Cambodia: Experts for Community Research, 2002).

⁷⁹ Sacrava, *Sacrava's Political Cartoon: Neak Ta Wutty*
<http://sacravatoons.wordpress.com/2012/05/09/sacravatoons-no-2209-neak-ta-wutty/> 2012.

⁸⁰ Rith and Strangio, *Villagers Curse Mondulkiri Plantation*; 2010; 2012.

⁸¹ Ki-media blogspot, 2010. <http://ki-media.blogspot.com/2010/09/stupid-as-stupid-swears.htm>.

⁸² Khmernews, "UN Styled Moustache and Eyes, but Cambodian Body: Neak Ta Dompong Dek Statue at ECCC," *Rasmei Kampuchea* 16, no. 4490 (2008); Penny Edwards, "The Moral Geology of the Present: Structuring Morality, Menace and Merit," in *People of Virtue: Reconfiguring Religion, Power and Morality in Cambodia Today*, eds. Alexandra Kent and David P. Chandler (Copenhagen: NIAS press, 2008), p. 219.

Minister, Hun Sen, who in a nationally televised speech on May 2, 2013, told voters that his son may be the child of a *`anak t̄ā*.⁸³

The above examples highlight the continued power of *`anak t̄ā* in contemporary Cambodia, who are invoked by the powerful as allies, by the disempowered as protectors, and who continue as arbiters of justice. They are dangerous interlocutors for all concerned and while they support the king and uphold justice, they are beholden to neither the law nor the institution of kingship. The justice of *`anak t̄ā* can disrupt the edifice of order. I have gone outside my ethnographic venue through historical and contemporary representations of *`anak t̄ā* in an effort to highlight their political significance and their participation in the structuring of society. The role of *`anak t̄ā* as members of the political hierarchy has waxed and waned since the colonial era, but every political administration has invoked them in one way or another. During post-colonial independence they were recalled to join political celebrations⁸⁴ and even the Khmer Rouge recognized the power of the *`anak t̄ā* by stating that Angkar (the Khmer Rouge) was the master of the water and the land.⁸⁵ In the current era their political duties have been curtailed, but I will now return to Sambok Dung to describe how they continue to manifest at the local level.

`Anak t̄ā demarcating territories

In Valeri's discussion of taboo among the Huaulu, his data shows that all community taboos emerge from the work that mediates the appropriation of animals from their "ultimate owner."⁸⁶ The socially structuring work of taboo informs who has access to which resources and by what methods resources can be accessed in light of the spirit's

⁸³ Julia Wallace, "The Fresh Princes of Phnom Penh," *New York Times* 2013.

⁸⁴ Hansen, *How to Behave: Buddhism and Modernity in Colonial Cambodia, 1860-1930*; Ian Harris, *Cambodian Buddhism: History and Practice* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2008); Davis, *Khmer Spirits, Chinese Bodies: Chinese Spirit Mediums and Spirit Possession Rituals in Contemporary Cambodia*

⁸⁵ Locard 1996, cited in Harris, Ian Charles, *Buddhism in a Dark Age: Cambodian Monks Under Pol Pot*, 2013), p. 96.

⁸⁶ Valeri, *The Forest of Taboos: Morality, Hunting, and Identity among the Huaulu of the Moluccas*, p. 319.

propriety. I suggest that this same work of attaching appropriation to explicit codes of conduct connects the state-making, territory-expanding projects of kings to the power of the owner of the water and the land. In many parts of Southeast Asia, Burma most notably and also in Cambodia, the spirits of the land are explicitly mobilized in the service of state making and its attendant territorial claims.⁸⁷ What is interesting about the new traditions enacted in Sambok Dung, is that the political, territorial aspects of the `anak tã – which remain somewhat salient in the national political arena – are not the themes around which people gather at the place of the spirit. I will engage with the relationship between the `anak tã and the king below, but like the oft cited capacity of the owner of the land to articulate kin and community discussed above, the powerful connection between local (and national) hierarchy and the `anak tã is rarely one of the ways that people describe their engagements with this spirit.

The most important concern for villagers is keeping the spirit well fed and happy and thus avoiding potential retributions that would threaten good health, a good harvest, or business success. Despite its lack of formal articulation on the part of participants, the agricultural rites performed for the `anak tã at the start of the plowing season and at the harvest in Sambok Dung made apparent the loosely constituted social groups in the village and hinted at the political significance attributed to the `anak tã in Cambodia.

There are three `anak tã that are important to the people of Sambok Dung and are attended to by those in proximity. The laborers along the railroad tracks make offerings at the hut of Tã Gum Yã Dã, the rice farmers in P'ijoo perform celebrations with Lok Tã Býng Kamñáp, and those in Phūmi Tã Porn and from the neighboring village, Phūmi Tã `Aū go see Lok Tã `Aū (see maps 2 and 3). In Sambok Dung no one suggested deep affiliation to one spirit or another, except as this pertained to spirits of the birthplace, *sruk*

⁸⁷ For detailed descriptions of the cult of the Nats in Burma see E. R. Leach, *Political Systems of Highland Burma: A Study of Kachin Social Structure* (Oxford: Berg Publishers, 2004 [1959]); Spiro, *Burmese Supernaturalism*; Brac de La Perrière, Bénédicte, *Les Rituels De Possession En Birmanie: Du Culte d'État Aux Cérémonies Privées* (Paris: Recherche sur les Civilisations, 1989). The Cambodian context will be expanded below.

kamṇoet.⁸⁸ But, the social segregations enacted spatially and through modes of production between the soldiers, wood laborers, and the rice farmers, also map loosely onto *`anak tā* celebrations (map 5).

These celebrations can be small, individual affairs like introducing the newcomer to the spirit or asking for help with a business transaction; they can be larger affairs with close friends and kin to ask the spirit for help healing sick family members or for intervention in large business deals (like buying plantation land); and they can also be large community celebrations in conjunction with the agricultural season. It is in these community celebrations that the subtle delineations of class and authority are visible. I want to stress that these distinctions were not cultivated, discussed, or paraded by participants. In fact, when I asked about them or suggested their presence, my questions and comments were shrugged off and given no energy by my interlocutors.⁸⁹ Perhaps the issue was rendered mute by its very obviousness. I will proceed, nonetheless, to describe the ways that class and authority seem to adhere to the communal celebrations performed in honor of the spirit of the water and the land.

In Sambok Dung, the *loeng`anak tā* celebration (*loeng* translates literally as ‘to raise’) was performed at the beginning of the plowing season to request adequate rains and a good harvest.⁹⁰ I was in Sambok Dung during two rainy seasons. For the first, in 2010, two locations held a *loeng`anak tā* celebration to call for rain, the third with Lok Tā `Aū was not performed because the rains were deemed sufficient. The Buddhist monks and members of the temple association attended the celebration with Lok Tā Býng Kamṇáp and the village head of Sambok Dung attended both celebrations. This man rarely attended Buddhist celebrations at the temple and I was surprised to see him at both

⁸⁸ One’s spirits are strongest at the birthplace, where *`anak tā* and ancestors reside. When one is ill and cannot recover, they go to their birthplace to either recover or die.

⁸⁹ There could be nothing in this ‘avoidance’, but it haunts me as an *unheimlich* undercurrent to the claims so often made to universal kinship and poverty in the village.

⁹⁰ The *loeng`anak tā* is considered an annual celebration for the village spirit. Some villages perform an elaborate *loeng`anak tā* celebration with a spirit medium and possession rites that is separate from the celebration to call the rains. There was no spirit medium in Sambok Dung and the calling for rain was treated as the annual celebration.

loeng`anak tã celebrations. It is also significant that the monks were only at one celebration. This will be explored more fully in Chapter 5, but *tã Reut*, who organized the *loeng`anak tã* with *Tã Gum Yāy Dã* told me they could not afford to bring the monks. They did invite the *chaey`am* players, however, who agreed to play for just the food and drink and so *Reut* felt he had done well by the spirits.

The celebrants at each spirit location came predominantly from their respective neighborhoods, which map both spatially and along class lines already discussed. What is of note, is the subtle tension invoked between state and monastic power at the site of the *`anak tã*; members of the temple association did not attend the celebration that had no monks but the village head went to both. Further, the lack of monks was cited by one temple association member as the reason he did not attend the celebration.⁹¹ It is also important that the lack of monks was directly attributed to a lack of funds.

The economy of spirit offerings is distinct from the economy of temple offerings in that spirit offerings return immediately and directly to the community while temple offerings stay with the monks. This tension also suggests the ways that spirit sociality is distinct from human sociality. The *`anak tã* may mark and help create territories of human sociality and the exercise of social power, but the spirits themselves are all connected and when a celebration is performed for one spirit, a call goes out for all spirits to join in the bounty. In 2011, the rains started early, but then stopped and seedlings dried up in the fields. In late July of that year, *Tã Gum Yāy Dã* told *tã Reut* in a dream that the rains had not yet come because they did the celebration too early. So, they held a second *loeng`anak tã* and called the monks to chant the blessings and receive the offerings with *Lok Tã Býng Kamṇáp*. *Tã Reut* and his compatriots living along the railroad tracks were not in attendance at this ceremony, but *Tã Gum Yāy Dã* and *Lok Tã `Aū* were invited to join in the food and drink. The call, variations of which I heard on numerous occasions, went like this:

⁹¹ The other members shrugged it off to busy schedules and excessive travel.

...lok tā *please bring the rains. We have made this food for you... we brought the chaey'am to play for you, to make you happy. The food is here already.... Bring all the spirits here, come Lok Tā 'Aū, Tā Gum Yāy Dā there is music and food here for you. Mcās dyk mcās tī call all the spirits to come. We all worked together to make this delicious food, you have been waiting, come now and take it.*

The *mcās dyk mcās tī* is called upon to bring all the spirits to the party. Villagers do not know all the spirits by name, but the offering is for all.⁹² All the spirits, that is.

The attachment of *'anak tā* with political power is more prominent in the literature on Cambodia than in the softly demarcated zones of social class in the village. During the harvest celebration, called *punya tārālān* (pronounced bun dalien), this relationship surfaced for a moment. *Punya tārālān* is the performed once the bulk of rice is out of the fields, typically in the Khmer month of *Māgh*, sometime between February and March by Gregorian reckoning. This celebration is part of the agricultural ritual cycle and is considered a companion celebration to the *loeng 'anak tā* held at the beginning of the plowing season.⁹³

It is expected that the monks will participate in all the spirit ceremonies. Adding monks adds expense to the ritual and it is understood that not all celebrations will have monks: but, they should. To ensure the availability of monks, all large celebrations are organized between the four villages that share the same temple. This need for monks

⁹² The traveling nature of land spirits is also remarked by Arensen in northwestern Cambodia, by spirit mediums I have encountered, by Guillou who notes how the circulating spirits are also connected to the perfected power of the Buddha, *pāramī*, and the circulating energy of the Dhamma, and by Bertrand. Arensen, *Making the Srok: Resettling a Mined Landscape in Northwest Cambodia*, pp. 118-23; Guillou, *An Alternative Memory of the Khmer Rouge Genocide: The Dead of the Mass Graves and the Land Guardian Spirits [Neak Ta]*; Bertrand, *A Medium Possession Practice and its Relationship with Cambodia Buddhism: The Grū Pāramī*.

⁹³ I was told by the *ācāry* that the name *tārālān* comes from this era. I do not know why the name changed, nor did my interlocutor, but an investigation into this could be interesting. I do not find the word in standard Khmer dictionaries. Zucker suggests it is a compound word meaning 'offering' and 'mat'. In the literature the harvest festival is called the celebration of the rice mountain, *phnaṃ srūv*, which was the other name offered by the *ācāry*. Is also associated with other rites that involve burning the fields after harvest Zucker, Eve Monique, *Forest of Struggle: Moralities of Remembrance in Upland Cambodia* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2013), pp. 152-55; Ang, *Les Êtres Surnaturels Dans La Religion Populaire Khmère*, pp. 209-214; Porée-Maspero, *Étude Sur Les Rites Agraires Des Cambodgiens*, pp. 583-597. Eve Zucker found this to be the largest festival in the village in which there were invitations extended to neighboring villages and attendance at each other's celebrations. I did not find this to be the case for the harvest celebration in Sambok Dung, but rather for the *katin*, the robe offering ceremony held at the end of the monastic rains retreat described in chapter five.

typically places the coordination of village ceremonies in the hands of the *ācāry* and the temple association. The *punya tārālān* in Sambok Dung in 2011 did not follow this pattern. The temple association did plan one ceremony at the temple and one at each of the two further villages, thinking the three celebrations would accommodate the needs of the four villages. The celebrations were not done at the sites of the village *`anak tā*, but the offerings were directed to all the area *`anak tā*, the *mcās dyk mcās fī*, and the interested other spirits in the vicinity, known and unknown.

In Sambok Dung, one additional *punya tārālān* was organized by tā Rein who lives next to the railroad. Rein is a well-connected soldier who has been in the region since the early 1990s and settled in Sambok Dung in 1997. He is active in the lumber business and his large compound is typically busy with non-local visitors and strewn with piles of freshly-sawed lumber. The decision to have the ceremony was made about three days in advance of the gathering and once the monk's availability was established, people were dispatched to spread the word. When I asked about the addition of this celebration to the other three already planned, I was told quite simply that the temple was so far away for the people by the railroad and they decided to hold another celebration.

This celebration was certainly neighborhood specific and the work groups that prepared the food and erected the shelter for the monks, the dining tables, and the rice mountain were exclusively from the neighborhood at the railroad tracks. One of the old nuns from the temple was present during preparations and helped make the *pāysī* and decorate the monk's bowls for the water blessings.⁹⁴ Motorcycles were dispatched around four in the afternoon and returned with two monks and the *ācāry*. Guests began to arrive shortly after that, bearing bags of rice in various sizes. People first brought their offerings to the *ācāry*; these consisted of unhusked rice for the rice mountain (which is donated to the temple and will be stored to feed the monks for the year), milled rice, small

⁹⁴ The *pāysī* is a tiered ornament used in a variety of ritual circumstances. They were explained to me as both part of the offering, often being decorated with betel leaves, and as receptacles to temporarily hold a visiting spirit.

denominations of money, and other little monastic necessities like candles, incense, or tea. Once the *ācāry* blessed the offerings and a record was made of who brought what, the sacks of unhusked rice were emptied onto the tarp to make the rice mountain. The people who came to give offerings were predominantly from the neighborhood around the railroad tracks and the ‘forest’ neighborhoods to the southwest. There were only a few families from the north side of the village who came. The village head was present as were all of the soldiers who live along the railroad (like the village head, they are not seen at temple celebrations). The members of the temple association, who were involved in the planning and execution of all other village celebrations I attended, were barely a part of this ceremony. They showed up late, made an offering, ate some food and left. They did not stay to dance and they did not return to make offerings to the monks in the morning.

All the other attendees, however, were active participants in the ritual and after each person made their offerings, they were invited to partake of the rice porridge prepared by *tā Reut* and paid for by *tā Rein*.⁹⁵ In this way, the compound slowly filled through the late afternoon with happy neighbors. Guests continued to arrive and the offering for the *`anak tā* was prepared. We carried a tray with small bowls of rice and meat, bananas, beer, cash, betel leaves, cigarettes, candles and incense. The guests gathered around a table at the edge of the compound, offerings were placed and the *ācāry* said the prayer to offer the mountain of rice and the food to the spirit. Then the monks were invited to chant the dhamma. Once the blessings and offerings were complete, the *ācāry* tells of the two projects they are trying to fund at the temple. The first was the building of a *cetiṃ*, which would act as a communal crypt for the village dead,⁹⁶ and the

⁹⁵ The ritual cycle for most celebrations I attended, agricultural rites, Buddhist ceremonies, weddings, funerals, etc., began with a community meal in the evening after which the monks chant the dhamma and offer a sermon. There is typically a dance party after the sermon. People gather again in the morning for blessings and to feed the monks and the celebration ends by offering the monks their midday meal after which is a large communal feast.

⁹⁶ The Khmer do not bury their dead. Cremation is preferred, after which the ashes are sifted through for chunks of bone and other material that did not burn. This is put into an urn and placed in the *cetiṃ* on temple grounds.

second was to increase the size of the small hill on the temple grounds where the *vihār*, the consecrated building in the temple complex, will be built.⁹⁷ After the *ācāry* described the projects for which they were collecting donations, the village head took the microphone.

This was unprecedented. I had only seen him speak at village meetings assembled at the school. He had been present at the *loeng`anak tā* celebrations, but never in a leading role or as an organizer and he never addressed the assembled community. The speech he made was a prepared document that he read rather stiffly for the assembled. Very few paid attention to his missive, the thrust of which was to organize a village protection committee, but its contents are interesting and I will summarize it here. The speech began by explicitly comparing the government with Buddhism. “*The government*,” he said, “*has five precepts, just like Buddhism*.”⁹⁸ He then went on to enumerate the government’s precepts: no stealing, no trafficking in addictive drugs, no domestic violence, no trafficking in women or children, and no lawless behavior. He continued, explaining how the government provides safety and services to the people, but that with the development of new roads villagers will be more at risk from strangers. The village police, he says, do not patrol in the evenings and so the people have to join together to protect each other and to warn the police if strangers are in the village.

There are numerous points of interest in this official communique, only one of which I explicate here to present local village customs. These foster the relationship between local authority and the owner of the water and the land and to point to the slight tension between the two foci of village authority. The *ācāry* described these contrasted modes of power as *buddhacakr* and *`añācakr*: the power of the Buddha and the state

⁹⁷ The project to make the hill bigger to accommodate the *vihār* was later discarded and a smaller *vihār* was planned, the foundation was laid in 2012.

⁹⁸ The precepts are the moral codes of Buddhism. Regular lay persons are expected to adhere to five. These are: Do not kill, do not steal, do not engage in sexual misconduct, do not lie, and do not consume intoxicating substances. There are others that are adhered to by more serious practitioners, *ācāry*, novices, and monks. For lay people, adhering to these practices is understood as quite difficult and few actually do. Only older people are really able to adhere to all of them.

respectively, which leaves a slight trace through the *`anak tã* celebrations in Sambok Dung. The village head and the soldiers, as representatives of state power, attend the gatherings for the spirit, but the spirit is not invited to state sponsored events like village meetings or the rituals of democratic elections, where the standards of the modern state prevail.⁹⁹

`Anak tã and Buddhacakr

The relationship between *`anak tã* and Buddhism in Sambok Dung is more reciprocal: monks attend the ceremonies for the *`anak tã* at their individual locations and *`anak tã* attend Buddhist celebrations at the temple. The owner of the water and the land has been present through the various tides of empire, and along with the humans in the territory, has adapted Brahmanist and Buddhist attributes accordingly. In Sambok Dung, the named and propitiated *`anak tã* introduced thus far are considered to be Buddhist and are pleased by the presence of Buddhist monks at their celebrations. The *`anak tã*'s administration of moral activity among villagers is understood in terms of the Buddhist virtues, *sil*, and even though, unlike monks, they drink beer and participate in the dancing, their power is tied up with the power of the Buddha. It is this entanglement of power, of circulating *pãramĩ*, that forms an important link between the spirits and Buddhist practice. Anne Guillou suggests that the power of the spirit, *pãramĩ*, "is perceived as a circulating energy present in some trees, stones, events, artifacts, people (especially of royal background) and spirits linked to special places."¹⁰⁰ This explanation is closest to what the residents of Sambok Dung tried to explain to me, with the additional sentiment that it flows along the social networks of the spirits.

⁹⁹ When the French attempted to reorganize the politico-territorial structure in 1904 and to include funding for *`anak tã* ceremonies as described above, the proposal was shot down with force and when the restructuring took place in 1908, including the *`anak tã* in state organization was untenable with the ideals of the bureaucratic state and the owner of the water and the land was shunned. Edwards, *Cambodge the Cultivation of a Nation, 1860-1945*, p. 170. It was not only colonial states that attempted to purge earth-beings and ancestors from the realms of public life.

¹⁰⁰ Guillou, *An Alternative Memory of the Khmer Rouge Genocide: The Dead of the Mass Graves and the Land Guardian Spirits [Neak Ta]*, p. 222.

There are important aspects of this term *pāramī* so intimately understood by villagers that connects the owner of the water and the land to the power of Buddhism and to the lives and histories of the Cambodian people. The first definition of the term is not power, as I initially understood it to be, but is rather, perfection: specifically the ten perfections cultivated by the Buddha over many lifetimes that enabled the achievement of nirvana. The Khmer transformation of this term into a circulating flow of energy that adheres in powerful places and persons is worthy of further investigation, but the three worlds of Buddhist cosmology: one of desire, one of form, and one of formlessness; fold earth deities and humans together in the world of desire. In a Buddhist world, the owner of the water and the land is the most powerful entity in the world of desire, but is still on a transformative journey through the world of birth and rebirth (*sāṅgsāra*).¹⁰¹

This transformative trajectory informs another way that *pāramī* is used that refers to spirits already perfected by Buddhism; such a spirit is called a *pāramī*.¹⁰² In conversations with people someone would say, “Yes, Phnam Tā `Aū has lots of *pāramī*,” meaning that the mountain itself is the source of great power and also that there are many benevolent spirits that inhabit *Phnam Tā `Aū*.¹⁰³ It took many questions and clarifications of each seemingly new use of this term to understand how the circulating energy of *pāramī* connects the spirits to the power of the land and the power of Buddhism.

In Sambok Dung, as recounted above, the Buddhist monks are invited to the celebrations for the territorialized `anak tã in the village. Most ceremonies are performed and offerings are made for the spirit on the Buddhist holy days, *tnai sil* and the *pāramī* of this day interacts with the offering and with the spirit. There is a near universal reporting that folds this spirit of the land into the Buddhist framework, but the `anak tã,

¹⁰¹ Frank Reynolds, Mani Reynolds and King of Sukhothai Lithai, *Three Worlds According to King Ruang: A Thai Buddhist Cosmology*, trans. Frank Reynolds and Mani B. Reynolds (Berkeley, Calif.: Distributed by Asian Humanities Press/Motila Banarsidass, 1982).

¹⁰² Didier Bertrand, “The Names and Identities of the ‘Boramey’ Spirits Possessing Cambodian Mediums,” *Asian Folklore Studies* 60, no. 1 (2001), 31-47.

¹⁰³ The `anak tã in this story is only one of the three spirits associated with *Phnam Tā `Aū*. The other two are of a different category and require a separate treatment.

the *mcâs dyk mcâs tī* is powerful beyond and differently than Buddhism, despite the social energy exerted to bring them into the same field of signification. One young woman described it perfectly when she said:

The spirits are connected to Buddhism because we use the tools and the language of Buddhism to talk to the spirits, but they are different –they are older. They come from the time before and we need to communicate with them, but the only language we know now comes from Buddhism.

This young woman makes an important and subtle point about the material form of the relationship between the spirits and Buddhism and also underscores the dependent relationship between humans and the spirits of the land. She emphasizes the villagers' need to communicate with the spirits and the use of Buddhist forms as supplemental to that need. These notions of transfer and translation between Buddhism and the spirits seems to work both ways, and people often make offerings of fruit, water/tea, and incense at their household *khdam* on the holy days of the Buddhist calendar. Most villagers say they are too poor to regularly attend *tnai sil* at the temple and they see these offerings to the *mcâs dyk mcâs tī* as a reasonable substitute. They make merit by engaging in the cycle of generosity and morality that are the first two perfections of the Buddha.

For a minority of villagers it is Buddhism that is powerful beyond the *mcâs dyk mcâs tī* and the presence of Buddhist monks at *`anak tã* celebrations is a condition for their participation. In a conversation at the temple about the celebrations for *`anak tã*, one member of the temple association said, "If there are no monks, I don't go." There is little uniformity in contemporary Buddhist practice in Cambodia with regard to the place of *`anak tã* or other spirits in Buddhist practice. Among my interlocutors, such purified notions were scarce, but they do inform Cambodian Buddhist practice to varying degrees across the country.¹⁰⁴ The relationship between *`anak tã* and Khmer Buddhism is most

¹⁰⁴ For discussions on some of the tensions between 'traditional' and 'ancient' conceptions of proper Buddhist practice as they play out in the contemporary field see: Satoru Kobayashi, "An Ethnographic Study on the Reconstruction of Buddhist Practice in Two Cambodian Temples: With the Special Reference to Buddhist *Samay* and *Boran*," *Southeast Asian Studies* 42, no. 4 (2005); John Marston, "Reconstructing 'Ancient' Cambodian Buddhism," *Contemporary Buddhism* 9, no. 1 (2008), 99-121; Harris, *Cambodian Buddhism: History and Practice*.

fully explored in the work of Ang, whose insights inform my own interpretations.¹⁰⁵ But, rather than engage the conundrum of the blurred boundaries and the impossibility of classification engendered by *`anak tã* and other spirits in the social fields of Southeast Asia, I will stick to my own data and present current practice and local interpretations from Sambok Dung.

In addition to the territorialized spirits introduced thus far, there are traveling *`anak tã* who participate in the Buddhist celebrations at *Vatt Phnam Tã `Aũ*. There are three *khdam* for *`anak tã* on top of the small hill at the Buddhist temple. Villagers call this hill the mountain child of *Tã `Aũ* and it is acknowledged as a powerful place by all the Khmer villagers. The three *khdam* sit to the north, east, and west of the concrete slab and tin roof structure that houses four large Buddha statues and will become the temple's *vihār*, the consecrated building in the Theravada temple complex (see map 1 and fig. 6 & 7). In a small clearing right next to the *vihār*, is the newest of the three *khdam* and the other two are within view further into the forest. The newest *khdam*, next to the *vihār*, is for the famous *`anak tã*, *Ghlāmng Myang*, introduced above. The *khdam* for *Ghlāmng Myang* was not built on my first visit to this temple in 2006, but appeared in conjunction with the military skirmish with the Thai in 2008. The other two are Honored Grandmother that Sips the Sea, *Lok Yāy Krep Samudr*, who ensures that water from the sea fills the clouds and spreads evenly and constantly into the rice fields and *Lok Tã `Aũ*, whose material representation in stone is in a *khdam* at the base of the mountain, but who also has the *khdam* on the temple grounds.¹⁰⁶

The three spirits atop the temple mound are honored at the big temple celebrations in the village by the troupe of *chaey'am* drummers, especially at the New Years and Robe

¹⁰⁵ Ang, *Les Êtres Surnaturels Dans La Religion Populaire Khmère*; Chouléan Ang, "The Place of Animism within Popular Buddhism in Cambodia: The Example of the Monastery," *Asian Folklore Studies* 47 (1988), 35-41; Ang, *La Communauté Rurale Khmère Du Point De Vue Du Sacré*; Ang, *Le Sol Et l'Ancêtre l'Amorphe Et l'Anthropomorphe*, 213.

¹⁰⁶ Ang also notes an ambiguity with *`anak tã* of the temple, which are often "in addition to the *`anak tã* of the village" and are engaged with a variety of heterogeneous ritual performances. Ang, *Les Êtres Surnaturels Dans La Religion Populaire Khmère*, pp. 220-21.

Offering ceremonies (*jūl chnam* and *katin* respectively). The *khdam* at this Buddhist temple have only *pāyasī*¹⁰⁷ to mark the presence of the spirit. There are no statues or stones that represent the spirit at the temple because the spirit does not reside on the top of this hill; these are temporary resting places for spirits to come and visit, to make merit and to enjoy the Buddhist celebrations.¹⁰⁸ The *pāyasī* hold the spirit that is called to this *khdam*; one middle-aged woman told me:

We build the khdam for the spirits to come join us in our celebration. We know what they like and take care of them. We are generous [mān jittaḷa] and call them here; we all want to make merit... They protect us from disease... they bring the rains and help the rice grow tall.

The *ʼanak tā* are invited to join in the Buddhist celebrations and are understood by villagers to be on their own transformative journey through the cycles of birth and rebirth that will eventually, in the far distant future, bring about perfection.

Relationships between powerful *ʼanak tā* and humans adhere to Khmer understandings of the morally transformative nature of hierarchal relationships.¹⁰⁹ Hansen traces this trajectory through late-nineteenth and early-twentieth-century vernacular sources. She begins with a text that forefronts the “intertwining conceptions of merit, power, Buddhist virtue, and the moral rendering of the physical universe” by casting the Khmer earth goddess as final arbiter in the cosmic story of the Buddha’s meditational victory over the evil Mārā; this is a world in which the “temporal and spatial structures of the physical world has moral dimensions and is the context in which moral progress takes place.”¹¹⁰ The relationship between the Buddha and the earth goddess, who “knew of each action he made” and comes to his aid with her braid full of water to wipe out the

¹⁰⁷ The *pāyasī* is a ritual object made from a variety of materials; coconuts or banana tree limbs with wrapped betel leaves, or shiny tinsel wrapped around paper cylinders. It is a receptacle or a vehicle used as part of the spirit’s journey into the human realm. It is an inhabitable space that holds the non-corporeal entity and facilitates visiting and movement.

¹⁰⁸ This temporary resting place is not characteristic of all *khdam* at Buddhist temples. Many *ʼanak tā* at the Buddhist temples are materially represented in *khdam* built by large trees or termite mounds on the grounds of the temple. Wat *Phnam Tā ʼAū* has no earth being in the temple complex.

¹⁰⁹ Davis, *Khmer Spirits, Chinese Bodies: Chinese Spirit Mediums and Spirit Possession Rituals in Contemporary Cambodia*, p. 179.

¹¹⁰ Hansen, *How to Behave: Buddhism and Modernity in Colonial Cambodia, 1860-1930*, p. 19.

enemy, suggests a world similar to the one described by Ang in which *`anak tã* are affiliated with other spirits and have access to their powers.¹¹¹

Hansen's story traces a shift in the themes of vernacular literature in which transformation no longer entails people of the invisible world, *manuss moel min ghoen*, literally, people we cannot see. Rather, the stories center more on the transformative hierarchal relationships between people and the workings of merit, power, and Buddhist virtue—the earth and the people we cannot see are no longer players among Cambodia's educated elite by the early twentieth century. In Hansen's story the transformative relationship involves an orphan who flees his burning highland village hidden under the cart of a lowland merchant. The orphan is adopted, educated, and becomes a learned monk through the care of the merchant and through his own hard work.¹¹²

In the interstitial zone of Sambok Dung, situated in the shallows of empire and poised to weather the next tide, the adoptive and care-taking relationship is cultivated with the owner of the land and the honored grandfather: the spirit never stopped being part of the morally infused physical world. Newcomers hailed it upon arrival and were later interpolated into long-term-relationships of mutual care and expenditure. The story is not one of great cosmic significance, but rather of local subsistence; the social relationships remain tinged with the possibility of malice and caprice, but they expect and offer kinship and care.¹¹³

At one private *`anak tã* ceremony the woman gathered her close friends and family to help her ask the spirit to cure her two sick children; *Lok tã*, she called over the offerings she prepared, *your grandchildren are sick, please come. I have delicious food for you and we brought the drums. Come and enjoy; come make merit and let the grandchildren be well.* It is in this spirit of care-taking and moral transformation that

¹¹¹ Ibid., p. 18; Ang, *Les Êtres Surnaturels Dans La Religion Populaire Khmère*, p. 216

¹¹² Hansen, *How to Behave: Buddhism and Modernity in Colonial Cambodia, 1860-1930*, pp. 170-83

¹¹³ Pou, Saveros, Ang, Chouléan, *Le Vocabulaire Khmer Relatif Au Surnaturel*, p. 66; Alain Forest, *Histoire Religieuse Du Cambodge: Un Royaume d'Enchantement* (Paris: Indes savantes, 2012), p. 196; P"uṇṇ, *Kamrang Aekasār Sṭī pī Prabaenī Ning Daṃṇiamdamláb Khmaer*, p. 186.

people invite the spirits to join in their social lives. Spirits are not neutral, and “they bear the marks of history,” as Robert Orsi suggests.¹¹⁴ He notes that the spirit gets “caught up and implicated in struggles on earth.” Behind her supplication of the benevolent spirit grandfather she is always aware that the spirit is also a dangerous enforcer of social norms, to which she may not always attend. It is not to the morality of the spirit that she appeals, nor is it to the spirit as omnipotent and circulating *paramī*, it is rather to the *presence* of the spirit and to the transformation available through cultivating that social relationship of unequal power. *We never know if lok tā hears us, but if we don’t ask, grandfather will not know that we need him. We are only small. Lok tā can come and help us and we offer food and music so his is not angry with us and will pity us.*

Conclusion

Chouléan Ang¹¹⁵ makes the important point that of the many spirits that inhabit the social lives of Cambodians, only the *`anak tā* takes physical form. Beyond the physical manifestation of this powerful interlocutor, the *`anak tā* is a spirit of both the forest and the village,¹¹⁶ of kings, of Buddhism, and bureaucracy,¹¹⁷ of agriculture and merit making, and of subsistence and the family. Social relationships with this person we cannot see, *manuss moel min ghoen*, are most visible in the context of Buddhism and represented as an incongruous element of religion in the literature. I have argued that the owner of the water and the land does not represent an original religion onto which Buddhism was either superimposed or by which Buddhism was incorporated. The owner of water and

¹¹⁴ Robert A. Orsi, *Between Heaven and Earth: The Religious Worlds People make and the Scholars Who Study them* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2005), p. 4.

¹¹⁵ Chouléan Ang, *People and Earth* (Phnom Penh, Cambodia: Reyum Gallery, 2000); Ang, *Les Êtres Surnaturels Dans La Religion Populaire Khmère*; Ang, *La Communauté Rurale Khmère Du Point De Vue Du Sacré*.

¹¹⁶ P"unṇ, *Kamrang Aekasār Stī pī Prabaenī Ning Daṃṇiamdamlāb Khmaer*, p. 191; Ang, *Les Êtres Surnaturels Dans La Religion Populaire Khmère*, p. 218; Forest, *Le Culte Des Génies Protecteurs Au Cambodge: Analyse Et Traduction d'Un Corpus De Textes Sur Les Neak Ta*, p. 23.

¹¹⁷ Alain Forest, "Cambodge: Pouvoir De Roi Et Puissance De Génie," in *Cultes Populaires Et Sociétés Asiatiques: Appareils Culturels Et Appareils De Pouvoir*, eds. "Alain Forest", "Yoshtaki Ishizawa" and "Léon Vandermeersch" (Paris: Editions L'Harmattan, 1991); Ang, *La Communauté Rurale Khmère Du Point De Vue Du Sacré*; Edwards, *Cambodge the Cultivation of a Nation, 1860-1945*.

the land is neither supernatural nor sacred, but is a respected and powerful earth-being with whom people establish long-term relationships of mutual care that are embedded in the material, juridical, and spiritual processes of dwelling.

I drew a short genealogy and traced the ways that a particular way of seeing the world, in which everything non-human is inert and without volition, inscribes the scholarship and the imaginations of those who are trained into it. I also presented data, both ethnographic and historical, that traced social relationships with this spirit that span the arch of human sociality, from basic subsistence and household maintenance, through local hierarchies and state formations, and into cosmological encounters with abstracted deities. The owner of the water and the land is irreducible to the realm of politics, economics, or religion, but is constitutive of all. Just as yāy Som suggested, *it is in everything*.

There is nothing supernatural or superhuman about *`anak tā*; it is a social actor with whom both the powerless and the powerful contend. Kings, monks, and politicians have at different times and with varying degrees of success attempted to outlaw them.¹¹⁸ Contemporary politicians in Cambodia sometimes call on them for assistance, adding legitimacy to their rule and a touch of fear at their alliance, and they remain salient in Cambodia's courts of law, as administrators of not law, but justice. In other parts of the world earth-beings are controversially being invited into bureaucratic constitutions.¹¹⁹ In the local context of a village recently cut from the forest, the owner of the water and the land is engaged in long-term relationships of care and mutual subsistence; they are visited by monks and local officials and are invited to join in the merit making at temple celebrations.

¹¹⁸ Hansen, *How to Behave: Buddhism and Modernity in Colonial Cambodia, 1860-1930*; Đỗ, Thiện, *Vietnamese Supernaturalism: Views from the Southern Region*; Heonik Kwon, *Ghosts of War in Vietnam* (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008); Holt, *Spirits of the Place: Buddhism and Lao Religious Culture*.

¹¹⁹ de la Cadena, *Indigenous Cosmopolitics in the Andes: Conceptual Reflections Beyond "Politics"*, 334-370.

The persistent presence of the owner of the water and the land throughout the ebbs and flows of empire and capital is suggestive. Lefebvre notes that, “a presence survives and imposes itself by introducing a rhythm.”¹²⁰ The ritual cycle of the spirit, through which people enact community and mutual dependence, is that presence—imposed through habit and through dream visitations: *come visit us, we are lonely*, said *Tā Gum Yāy Dā*. *Bring music*, they said, *bring food and dance*. This is the rhythm of presence that the spirit imposes; it outlines the contours of social relationships and subsistence strategies that change with changing environments. But, like the dirt trail that morphs with the rhythm of rain and drought, with continued use it maintains a similar form through each permutation.

The stories about the owner of the land change; Orsi notes that the labor of memory and practice necessary to uproot them is “unequal to the power and presence in things and places, and in memory...”¹²¹ The *`anak tā* holds, transmits, and is *pāramī*; *`anak tā* aligns with power energetically embroiled in the birth of the prime minister’s son, and emerges against power absorbing the spirit of murdered anti-logging activist Chut Vutty. de Certeau suggests that the story is an act of enunciation, “an exacerbation of ‘practice’”, that narrates what one can do in a place.¹²² The story is at once a bridge and a frontier; it marks the other side as distinct, but present. It marks the contact zone where modes of practice create subjects from objects. Once people stop interacting with the owner of the water and the land the social relationships will cease. But does this mean that the spirit disappears? Does an entity require *human* interaction to exist? If a tree falls in the forest with no one to hear it, does it make a sound? My friends in Sambok Dung would ask, “how could there ever be *no one* in the forest?” It may just depend on the stories we tell.

¹²⁰ Henri Lefebvre, *Rhythmanalysis: Space, Time, and Everyday Life* (London; New York: Continuum, 2004) p. 23.

¹²¹ Orsi, *Between Heaven and Earth: The Religious Worlds People make and the Scholars Who Study them*, p. 9.

¹²² Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, p. 119.

The Cham: History, memory, and practice

History vacillates between two poles. On the one hand, it refers to a practice, hence to a reality; on the other, it is a closed discourse, a text that organizes and concludes a mode of intelligibility.¹

So you want to know about the history of us that are the Islamic race? You want to know what we of the Cham race do. We pray 5 times each day. We only eat certain foods, foods that have been offered and properly slaughtered...²

The stories I gathered from the Cham in Sambok Dung come from the forested edge of Pursat Province and from river's edge that runs through Kandal, Kompong Chhnang, and Pursat. These are the stories from generations of woodcutters and cattle dealers, from rice farmers and fishermen. People talked of Khmer Rouge displacements and their subsequent search for land, of depleted and now growing families and shifting modes of subsistence, and of the global flows of capital and ideas from international and diasporic Islamic aid that inform current religious practice and access to resources. With origins in the Champa Kingdom, an early Brahmanic state once powerful in the region today known as central Vietnam (map 4a), the history of diasporic Cham movement started around the ninth century and is thick with the detritus of empires past and present. Stories of conquest and diaspora, of ancient Brahmanic kings and Islamic conversion inform the scholarly literature on Cambodia's Cham, but not the stories that my friends in Sambok Dung tell about themselves.

In our talks together they told me about growing rice and communal labor, about having babies and getting married, and about the movements that brought them to Sambok Dung in search of land. I eventually asked pointed questions about the kingdom of Champa and Islamic

¹ Michel de Certeau, *The Writing of History* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), p. 21.

² Tun Di, Village elder, Sambok Dung.

conversions and in this chapter I put their intimate portrayals of themselves into conversation with narratives of ethnic history and glorious empire constructed through the scholar's gaze. These stories of the lived experiences recounted by a diasporic people from a once powerful state illuminate the connective tissues that attach people to the vestiges of domination, but they also show people actively attaching themselves to that domination.

In previous chapters, I stretched Ann Stoler's invocation of "imperial debris", in which she points to the decadence of nostalgia that attends the travelers and scholars of empire. She notes that "some ruins are loved more than others",³ giving voice to the possibility of another kind of ruin, not the noun but the more active and present-tense verb form of the ruin: ruination. Moving between the material debris of grand stone structures built by the *corvée* of ancient kings, and the processes by which empire leaves its mark during and long after its collapse, Stoler connects degraded persons and landscapes to their colonial origins only slightly obscured. I suggested that the debris of empire invoked by Stoler is deeper than the colonial project driving her interpretation;⁴ it extends through the ebb and flow of numerous tides of imperial expansion. I also push the idea of debris beyond the physical and attend to the phenomenal ontologies that describe the imperial worlds brought into being through the material and ideational productions of temples and tales. In this chapter I will go further still to suggest that the act of loving some ruins more than others, and with that amorous gaze pulling them forever toward the light, marks acts of ruination in which the horrors of genocide and the grandeur of empire pose together in the landscape as "obscured entailments and subjacent durabilities" of scholarly production.⁵

³ Ann Laura Stoler, "Introduction 'the Rot Remains': From Ruins to Ruination," in *Imperial Debris: On Ruins and Ruination*, ed. Ann Laura Stoler (Durham; London: Duke University Press, 2013), p. 27.

⁴ Ann Laura Stoler, "Imperial Debris: Reflections on Ruins and Ruination," *Cultural Anthropology* 23, no. 2 (2008), 191-219.

⁵ Stoler, *Introduction "the Rot Remains": From Ruins to Ruination*, p. 6

The Cham are uniquely situated in multiple imperial flows and the stories of my Cham research participants disrupt the agentive power of empire implied by Stoler, in which people are “forced to reckon with features of those formations in which they remain vividly and imperceptibly bound”,⁶ and show people purposefully attaching themselves to imperial formations through time. They drag their desires through displacement, recreating traditions in new places and grabbing onto new systems of domination and protection. The global flows of international Islam currently provide access to resources and group identity; forms of protection that many Cham religious minorities in Cambodia engage, giving voice to the deeply social and intentional actions that enter relationships of unequal power and trade the power of the saints for international education.

The Cham of French colonial scholarship are the defeated and displaced remnants of the once great Champa kingdom. They traveled over the mountains, across the plains, and up the rivers from the peninsular coastline and settled in Cambodia. They transplanted skills as boat builders, traders, and fishermen and found a niche as butchers in a Buddhist kingdom. They settled along the riverbanks of the Mekong and Tonle rivers and created a social landscape that persists into the present, linking the Cham of the past to routes of trade and ideas flowing through the region. Contemporary rural Cambodia is a media scarce environment that thwarts Arjun Appadurai’s focus on the images of visual media as the primary vectors for disseminating globalized imaginaries.⁷ Nonetheless, the never-ending planetary movement of people, capital, trade, and ideas reaches and informs village imaginaries today just as in empires past.

Visions of the modern world do not come to the Cham I know via disembodied mediascapes, rather in Sambok Dung stories of the coming empire travel along the gossip road.

⁶ Stoler, *Imperial Debris: Reflections on Ruins and Ruination*, p. 193.

⁷ Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization* (Minneapolis, Minn.: University of Minnesota Press, 1996).

Traveling Muslim merit-makers and proselytizers come to help revive and develop Islam in Cambodia: they build mosques, sponsor holy-day feasts, and help fund transnational pilgrimage and education. The electronic images of the global empire that figure so strongly in Appadurai's depictions of global flows arrive in Cambodia via individual persons, whose personal depictions of Islamic tradition transform Cham images of themselves into modern subjects connected to the larger movements of people and ideas. When I visited with and interviewed the Cham in Sambok Dung, I listened to stories of birthplaces and parents, of experiences during Pol Pot, and of all the moves and changes since that time. People told me about their difficult lives today, the hardships of village life, the encroachments of government concessions,⁸ and how their neighborhood of Cham worked together to plant and harvest everyone's fields, to raise the road for rice, and to build the prayer house. I had to ask most of them about their religion and when I did ask, the stories of poverty, displacement, and minority status took a different tone.

The Cham in Cambodia today are connected; they have some powerful representatives in the government's Ministry of Cults and Religion and receive funding from international Islamic aid programs. This connection to global flows is at once imaginary and material. They have a newly constructed concrete prayer house next to a wooden hut built on stilts. Thinking of the concrete structure, and addressing my surprise at the claim they had built it themselves, one man said, *Yes, we built it, the old one, the new one was built by them... the international Islamic organizations* [*`angkar Islam `antarajāti*].⁹ The reciprocal world of this man moved from the tight network of neighborhood work groups directly out to the international community. None in

⁸ The economic land concessions were accompanied by fishing concessions, and the fishing families in Sambok Dung suffered under Vietnamese control over large sections of the Tonle Sap Lake to which they no longer had access for subsistence fishing. These lots were officially abolished in 2010, but remain part of a patrimonial system that determines access to prime fishing locations on the lake.

⁹ The majority of Cham speak Khmer, but all speak Cham in their homes. I do not speak Cham and all interviews were conducted in Khmer.

Sambok Dung traveled along these global circuits and few were literate, but visits by proselytizers who confidently teach ‘correct’ Islamic practice and the small prayer house they built enfold villagers into the ideas of global Islam and ground that practice in a concrete structure. *We, brothers and sisters in Islam, we take care of each other*, was a common phrase.

But their stories of themselves did not return to Champa. My notes had nothing about the story of Champa and of diaspora, and of the spirit practices that filled the literature and the Khmer discourse about the Cham.¹⁰ So, in the interest of finding what was missing I went looking for these stories. What I found will facilitate a discussion that self-consciously replicates and critically invokes the deep history of Champa rendered through scholarly productions of the past and the present, to which I will add an outline of twentieth and twenty-first century history and academic scholarship, and will conclude by putting people’s words about their current lives into conversation with other’s constructions of Cham history.

Theoretical Interlude

The decidedly academic and imperial nature of this pursuit of history deserves a brief digression. The making of history Michel de Certeau provokes the creator of history to consider how the “history of ideas... manifests the unconscious of historians, or rather that of the group to which they belong.”¹¹ Pierre Bourdieu adds to that the admonition that it is the scholarly work of construction and representation that “makes up part of the reality of the state...”¹² As I reflect on

¹⁰ Ing-Britt Trankell, "Songs of our Spirits: Possession and Historical Imagination among the Cham in Cambodia," *Asian Ethnicity* 4, no. 1 (2003), 31-46; Emiko Stock, "De l'Hétérogénéité Des Chams Du Cambodge: Représentations Identitaires Au Travers Des Diagrammes De Protection Magiques" INALCO- Département Asie du Sud Est); Alberto Pérez Pereiro, "Historical Imagination, Diasporic Identity and Islamicity among the Cham Muslims of Cambodia" (PhD, Arizona State University).

¹¹ Michel de Certeau, *The Writing of History* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), p. 29.

¹² Pierre Bourdieu, "Rethinking the State: Genesis and Structure of the Bureaucratic Field," in *State/Culture: State-Formation After the Cultural Turn*, ed. George Steinmetz (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1999), p. 55.

the historical reproductions created at my request by my Cham friends in Sambok Dung, I notice first the way they manifest elements of contemporary life expressed through the particular tellings of the same history and reveal the concerns of individual historians through the versions of the story each recounts. Also rendered through my academic pursuit of history, through my desire to reconcile the people I met face to face with those I met through the writings of others, were the subtle outlines of an existing framework of imperial fascination that attends to kings, religions, and their respective projects of extraction and purification.

Pierre Bourdieu suggests that the social scientist, as an actor whose scholarly productions address, illuminate, critique, or advance state projects, produces the “performative discourse on the state which, under the guise of saying what the state is, caused the state to come into being”¹³ The stories I solicited and heard tapped the unconscious concerns of the historians who told them and were depicted in terms of various imperial logics: the strictures of Islamic practice, the magic of Champa’s kings, and the contemporary concerns of economic encroachment and globally dispersed citizenship. As I addressed the home spun stories of my interlocutors to the available knowledge produced in royal chronicles, colonial era productions, and contemporary historiography, they began to take on certain concerns of the present system of politically organized subjection, especially territory, religious identification, and education. As I move through the rest of the chapter, I will point to the places where I see the stories slipping into the frameworks of each set of historians.

The Stories

¹³ Ibid., p. 71.

When I realized that my notes lacked any reference to the ancient kingdom of Champa from which all Cambodian Cham are rumored to have come, I was compelled to investigate that absence. Toward that end, I went to visit my friend *Slieman*, one of the elders in the community and a very religiously observant man. I went to him with my question of historical origins, because he was a lively and respected character in the neighborhood. He was not a *tuen*, but he was well liked and articulate.¹⁴ I arrived with my assistant one morning and two of the village *tuen*, *Tun Dī* and *Tuen Ja* were at his house drinking tea and visiting. I was glad to find them in their typical visiting mode and to have such a good representation of village wise men with whom to discuss this problem of history. I was warmly greeted and offering my host a package of tea and introducing my assistant, I sat down and we traded gossip for a bit.

After a little small talk, I asked *Slieman* if he could tell me the history of the Cham people in Cambodia. *Slieman* did not answer however; instead the youngest in the group, *Tun Dī*, spoke up, saying,

So you want to know about the history of us that are the Islamic race [Janajāti Islām]? You want to know what we of the Cham race do. We pray 5 times each day. We only eat certain foods, foods that have been offered and properly slaughtered; we, husbands and wives, keep our homes clean and especially the area where we pray, at the mosque it is already clean, but in the home we must take care to clean it... We don't eat pork, mainly we eat the chickens that we raise here at the house. If you, my sister, came here visiting to share in a neighborly way [râp `ân] and brought me a chicken or had prepared food and brought it here to me, I couldn't eat it. It must be prepared in the proper way. We hold the month of fasting, during which time we cannot eat or drink in the daytime, until 6pm we cannot eat... We observe the birthday of Muhamad and the Hadj. During these times, the wealthy come to make offerings to the poor. If we have money, we will go to Mecca, but those who have enough money also come here to give money to the poor. The Malaysians and the Kuwaities come to help us during these celebrations to follow the rules of Islam and to help us and make merit.

¹⁴ A *tuen* is a learned man, teacher, and often leader of the Muslim communities. The word comes from Malaysia.

We went on like this for some time, with everyone joining in to explain the various observances of the year and the kinds of offerings they make and receive. After about forty minutes discussing rites and observances, I questioned again about the history of the Cham, this time attempting a different tack to get us to the ancient history I was looking for. I asked about the Cham language and how long they have been using it. Again, *Tun Dī* answers.

We have spoken the Cham language since ancient times; since the times of the Kingdom of Champa.

I waited for elaboration, but had to ask another question: do you have any stories from this period?

Stories from Champa? Yes, from the beginning the Cham had a country and a king. The Cham king had a Cham wife. Then a group of Yuan [Vietnamese] maidens came to make offerings to the king and the king took one of them as his wife. This was how the Cham kingdom fell from above the Yuan and had to run. They ran to all the countries, Kampuchea, China, Malaysia, India, and America.

He was going to end his story there, but the eldest, and frailest, of the group, *Tuen Ja*, chimed in and said:

There was a war. The Yuan king invaded Champa, saying. “now that Yuan is the wife of Champa, we are all one country.”

Tun Dī comes back in and says:

Yuan had no king at this time, there was no country: there was only the king of China and the king of Champa. Yes, there was war and then they ran to the other countries and now there are Cham in all the countries, since the oldest times: in Kampuchea, in India, in America we have Cham.

He said this with finality, his story was over. This is the explanation.

I wait, and then ask, why was there a war?

Tuen Ja comes in at this point to clarify the Vietnamese intention.

We had a war because the Yuan wanted Cham territory. When the Cham king married the Yuan maiden then they came, the Yuan invaded Champa and the Cham fell. The Cham king fell to the Yuan and the Cham had to run to other countries.

Tun Dī answered again,

Yes, this is how the Cham came to Kampuchea. They had no state and they ran.

Then I ask about the different types of Islamic practice we see in Cambodia today and how that came about.

This is when my friend *Slieman* joined the discussion. He said:

The Cham practiced only one kind of Islam in Champa: this is the Original Cham. If you're asking about the old story, this is how it goes:

The Yuan came in a boat to the country of Champa and they asked the king for an island on which they could settle. The island was given and after a few generations they prospered with many children and had to spread from the island. The Yuan began to move into the country of Champa and the Cham King became enamored of one of the maidens. The girl was then sent to the king in tribute and he took her as his wife.

The girl begins to work magic [dhvœ `ampœ] on the king and make him sick. He gets sicker and sicker... they call many healers to no avail, the Yuan kru is called and says: if you want to get well, you have to chop down the tree in the center of your garden in front of the royal palace. [this tree is the g'rek tree and is the legendary center of the Cham king's power] The king sends his soldiers to chop down the tree. They can't. Finally, the king goes to chop the tree himself. The tree bleeds and cries out and then falls. The king then takes the tree and makes a boat of it and sails the boat to meet the Yuan king. He sails into a trap and has to cut off the head of his boat to escape. His army is fractured and the king runs alone through the woods, hiding in a well from the Yuan army. Spiders come and cover the mouth of the well with a thick web and the Yuan soldiers pass by many times before one hears a geko cry at the spot of the well. The soldier cuts the web and finds the king, severs his head and brings it back to the Yuan king. The body and the head were dismembered, but did not die or rot. The king's head

searched for its body, which was also searching for the head. They were soon reunited and the king, newly animated, escaped through the mountains and the people of Champa fled to China, India, Malaysia, Kampuchea... In Kampuchea they were given land and protection from the king, which is why there are more Cham in Kampuchea than in other countries.

At that time, I was told, there was no Islam. Only the religion of the Original Cham, also called *Puek Jahed, sasana Ta San, or Imam San*. At the end of our discussion *Slieman* makes an interesting comment. He says, *We are all one people, all children of Adam, but some are older siblings and some are younger. The phnang are the oldest, the Asians are the middle child and the Europeans are the youngest.* The term *phnang* in this context is a generic term that refers to people of the hill tribes. With this comment, my friend *Slieman* disrupts the teleology of the state narrative even as his story enacts it. By using kinship terminology that explicitly represents hierarchal social order, he puts the ‘primitive’ hill people at the top of the social order. But, his story shows how the Cham fled not to the mountains and the wisdom of their elder siblings; rather they fled to other states and settled in the largest numbers under a protective Buddhist king.

The literature also suggests some ambivalence in the relationship between the hill people and the Cham. Collins notes that when Champa fell, the royal treasures of the kingdom were distributed to locations in the highlands for safekeeping, where they remain protected by highland chiefs.¹⁵ In a further twist, Arturo Pereiro followed a Cham organized conversion campaign into the northeast highlands, where an isolated, non-muslim, ethnically Cham community is being proselytized; at once ushered into the light of Islam and enacting the role of younger sibling to be brought into the fold by their cosmopolitan elders.¹⁶ Pereiro encountered

¹⁵ William Collins, "The Chams of Cambodia," (1996).

¹⁶ Pérez Pereiro, *Historical Imagination, Diasporic Identity and Islamicity among the Cham Muslims of Cambodia*, p. 70, 251. New research by William Noseworthy also explores what may be an unstable boundary that separates the hill people from their imperial neighbors of the present and the past (personal communication; October 2013).

similar nostalgia with regard to the Imam San group, whose history and practice are valued by some converted Cham as “the original Cham people and their Champa traditions.”¹⁷ This theme comes up in the literature as well and seems to relate to both the close relationship that the Cham, and other SEA trading centers, shared with their highland neighbors, as well as a trend in global Islam to favor what Cynthia Mahmood calls, “indigenous patterns of culture”.¹⁸ I might suggest that the conversion from and valorization of Champa traditions it is a bit of imperial nostalgia, nicely rendered by Levi-Strauss when he says, “What I see is an affliction to me; and what I do not see, a reproach.” What is visible in the other must be purged, but not lost.

Making History

This story satisfied my own imperial desire to classify and compare my data in light of the corpus of produced knowledge about Cham history, founding and re-creating the established narrative in my own way. It also plays with history a bit as the tellers of the story pull the past into the present, and perhaps imaginatively alter the present through the telling. Using my power as the juridical arbiter of narrative, I will arrange what I know of the local historians quoted above and use those personal histories to highlight the frontiers established and crossed in their production of history. de Certeau suggests that the story is “delinquent”; it exists in the interstitial zones of structuring logics and separations, exposing the interacting subjects through the act of delimitation.¹⁹

Supplementing the intimate stories my friends produced with my knowledge of their personal histories, and adding this to the small corpus of knowledge produced by academics and

¹⁷ Ibid. p. 78.

¹⁸ Cynthia Mahmood, “Left, Right, and Wrong on Religion: Asymmetries of Power and Knowledge in Global Insurgency,” *Anthropology News* 53, no. 9 (2012), p. 5.

¹⁹ Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), pp. 127-30.

colonial masters I will also attend to the structuring logic of empire made visible by the delinquent story. I am an interacting subject in this unfolding and the story above is, of course, situational: all the data I offer here was acquired using the Khmer language during informal visits at people's homes and during chance encounters and meetings in the neighborhood. At the time of the above conversation, I was a known entity at *Slieman's* house and in the village in general, so the talk was open and friendly. But, I always had my note pad and my tape recorder and this time we were talking about 'History'.

I will take a moment here to introduce my primary interlocutors in this act of history making and discuss the diversity of Islamic practice among them; supplementing this with academic production I will introduce what social scientists say about contemporary Islamic practice in Cambodia more broadly. The men in this group are all Cham and do identify with the Kingdom of Champa that disintegrated finally in the nineteenth century. The eldest, *Tuen Ja* is a 75 year old rice farmer whose family came to Sambok Dung from the neighboring village in Pursat Province in the late 1990s, claiming rice land from the newly quiet forest. The youngest, *Tun Dī* is 58 and a fisherman whose family came from the Tonle Sap. Previously landless, they claimed concession land here in 2004, but keep their fishing boat on the river and take it to the lake in the dry season. *Slieman* is 72 and came to Sambok Dung from Phnom Penh with his 40 year old Khmer wife in 2005, they claimed concession land as well, but live largely off his soldier's pension: he fought for both Lon Nol and for Hun Sen during their respective eras of military mobilization. They all pray 5 times a day and claim no relationship with spirits or magic; the eldest, *Tuen Ja* followed his parents to more conservative practice as a young man in the 1950s. The youngest, *Tun Dī* was exposed to reformed practices as a parentless young man after Pol Pot along the river in Kompong Chhnang, he had always prayed five times per day, but

his parents kept protective amulets and made offerings to their recently dead, practices he now leaves behind. *Slieman* also converted in the early eighties from the *Jahed* tradition to more conservative practice through the influence of Malaysians offering alms in Phnom Penh.

There will be more on conversions below, I will continue here with more thorough descriptions of Islamic practice in Cambodia. *Slieman* was raised in the *Jahed* tradition, also known as the religion of Ta San or Imam San and his story of the fall of Champa closely resembles others I have heard from followers of Imam San. William Collins suggests that the term, *Jahed* comes from the Arabic word *zahid* meaning pious, ascetic, and devout. It refers to the community's orthodox stance in a Sufi style of Islam preached by the 19th century leader Imam San. San forged close ties with the Khmer King at Oudong and was given a place for his mosque and his grave on Chetrya Mountain in Oudong. On this mountain, the bones of many Khmer kings rest in their Jedi²⁰ and the cult of the Cham kings is enacted each year.²¹ The *Jahed* speak Cham and Khmer and maintain the Cham script. *Tuen Ja* and *Tun Di* are both from the majority sect who identify themselves as Cham.

This group holds the reformed conservative practices of 5 daily prayers, circumcision, and Arabic recitation of the Qur'an when possible, but group practices can differ widely. The current state of 'reformed' practice among Cambodia's Cham reveals the traces of imperial impositions on religious practice that tie the Cham to Malay and Arabic Muslims through many generations. It is common in Cambodia for Cham to retain non-conservative traditions that vary from engaging in cults of powerful saints at their burial sites, to wearing amulets, and making offerings to personal ancestors;²² while others ascribe to more conservative practices like

²⁰ Collins, *The Chams of Cambodia*, p. 37b.

²¹ Trankell, *Songs of our Spirits: Possession and Historical Imagination among the Cham in Cambodia*, 31-46.

²² None that I met admitted or exhibited such practices, but Sambok Dung has a very small number of Cham families (40 in all, one third of families in Sambok Dung). It is significant that the burial sites of saints and the

wearing the *purdha*, woman's robe, and the turban, the *imamah*, and purging all spirit practices. They speak both Cham and Khmer, and many speak and read Malay. The *Cheva*, who spread along the gulf coast out of what is today Malaysia, preceded the Cham diaspora into Cambodia and remain in the south. They practice an Islam that conforms closely with conservative Malaysian practice and they often speak Malay in addition to Khmer, but not Cham. The produced literature suggests that they shun spirit practices and ancestor veneration and pray 5 times a day, this may not represent actual practice and as I have no ethnographic experience with the Chvea, I leave this open for further research.²³

This places the storytellers in their appropriate subject positions according to the literature at hand, which unsurprisingly focuses on separation, classification, and delineation. This is never quite so clean on the ground. For my friends, the group identity as Cham and Muslim homogenized them, and people self-identified using the term *janajāti* (pronounced *junjiet*), which translates as race. This term comes from the Pālī meaning 'birth' and encompassed multiple concepts, including ethnic identity and social status. It transformed in the early twentieth century to harmonize with the more codified colonial classifications of race. Further morphing through the colonial and post-colonial periods it now also designates nation and signifies alignment with a political body, which seemed magically to fold into the notion of birth and ethnic origins.²⁴ The way the Cham use it today highlights Cham ethnicity and I suggest it retains its nationalist overtones when people tell me they are *janajāti Islam*. In this context, Islam retains its association to religious practice, but also signals attachment to Islam as a sovereigntiesque entity. The penchant for deep classification is not, however, salient among the

creation of amulets, spells, and healing techniques are sites where Khmer and Cham acknowledge the same power and speaking together in Khmer, they call it *pāramī* (personal communication, Emiko Stock, March 2014).

²³ Personal Communication, Emiko Stock, March 2014.

²⁴ Penny Edwards, *Cambodge the Cultivation of a Nation, 1860-1945* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2007), pp. 12-15.

Cham. They acknowledge educational differences and variations of Islamic practice, but consider themselves a cohesive group. They laughed at Pereiro when he attempted to get specific Islamic group identity (like those I trotted out to classify my interlocutors; *Jahed*, *Cham*, and *Cheva*), people simply insisted that they were *Chām dhammatā*, regular Cham.

Theoretical Interlude

My story thus far has foregrounded the fraught worlds of history created by the academic production of knowledge as much as by individual tellers of their own stories. This theme will remain and will continue to help me expose the imperial logics of history making that in the current era privilege the nostalgic gazing at kings and their archeological debris and the boundary marking of ethnicity and territory. From this vantage point, I will move into the relations of power and protection between the diasporic Cham living in Cambodia and the ideas, practices, and the capital flows of transnational sources of power. The strong influence of global Islam dominates much of the recent literature on the Cham of Cambodia. The power and persuasiveness of this global force does have disruptive potential for other claims to sovereignty and control, but for my interlocutors it is an important source of resources that strengthens their group identity. Their diasporic imaginings highlight Arjun Appadurai's conception that locality is in the continual flux of renegotiation that generates socially shared understandings of the world.²⁵ Contrary to Appadurai's understanding, however, the earlier sections of this chapter highlight the ways that transnational flows of power and information and the renegotiation of space and sociality are not at all new. Islamic authority among the Cham has always come from the outside, as have extensive regional trade relationships, and the long roots of Cham relations

²⁵ Appadurai, *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization*; Pérez Pereiro, *Historical Imagination, Diasporic Identity and Islamicity among the Cham Muslims of Cambodia*.

with Malaysia entwine religious, political, and trade relationships going back many generations; all of these take multiple forms in contemporary imaginings.²⁶

Jonathan Friedman thinks of globalization not as an era, as many suggest, but as a phase. Globalizing processes, he says, are “historical, not evolutionary”.²⁷ Friedman points to periods of centralized accumulation and trade followed by decentralization and localization. This is the history that is written on the landscape and in the lives of villagers in Sambok Dung, the global is sometimes present and sometimes not. Mission trips from Malaysia reached the market town north of Sambok Dung in the early to mid-1950s, in that period *Tuen Ja* tells us that villagers were encouraged to leave behind the shrines to the saints and stop the offerings to the dead. At that time two large, concrete mosques were constructed to replace the thatch structures that served the Cham in this rural region.²⁸ Global Islam did not return to this region until 2004, when mosque constructions and reconstructions began again in this remote region, accompanied by renewed concern over modes of Muslim practice. I chose the metaphor of tides, ebbing and flowing with historical and environmental conditions to describe the process. Cham history, as told by themselves about themselves and as produced as an object of study, demonstrates the ebbs and flows of transnational connections over time.

The ideational flows of the globalized economy are certainly speeding things up, quickening the “glacial force of the habitus”, as Appadurai suggests.²⁹ The imaginative constructions of social life, however, are in no way new, as Appadurai would have it, neither do

²⁶ The Malay Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad, launched a campaign to determine the Malay origins of the Cham and many Cham of the Mekong Delta region claim they migrated to the delta from Malaysia 300 years ago, see Collins, *The Chams of Cambodia*, p. 67; Philip Taylor, *Cham Muslims of the Mekong Delta: Place and Mobility in the Cosmopolitan Periphery* (Honolulu: Asian Studies Association of Australia; In Association with University of Hawai‘i Press, 2007), pp. 53-58.

²⁷ Jonathan Friedman, *Globalization, the State, and Violence* (Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira Press, 2003), p. 2.

²⁸ See also, Raymond Scupin, "Historical, Ethnographic, and Contemporary Political Analyses of the Muslims of Kampuchea and Vietnam," *SOJOURN: Journal of Social Issues in Southeast Asia* 10, no. 2 (10, 1995), 301-328.

²⁹ Appadurai, *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization*, p. 6.

they only travel along the mediated routes that he describes. I do not take issue with the very real way that mechanically produced images, imagined communities, and *imaginaire* created by the interplay of text and practice conspire to inform the social practice of imagining the world into being.³⁰ What I question is the application of its mediated nature to all inhabitants of the global empire and the fictional smoothness of the suggestion that this is some new invention supplied by modernity. Such an act totalizes the “longer networks” of contemporary technology and misses not only that the network is “local at all points”, as Bruno Latour points out,³¹ but also that even without the network, the local is present and engaging in the social practice of imagining the world with every foray into the forest and the fields.³²

The longer networks of the current empire are not, however, a mere trifle and this particular tide of the transnational imaginary does run high. With this high tide, we can see that the landscapes created by the global flow of ideas are sites of imaginative world-making. To this, however, I add that these imaginary landscapes are attended by flows of capital that supply the imagery and groom potential consumers, “spreading individual liberty to areas that have been longing to embrace it for years.”³³ I add this quote from Micklethwait and Wooldridge with my tongue in my cheek, because the individual liberty to embrace a purified form of global Islam is

³⁰ Ibid., pp. 28-32; Walter Benjamin, “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” in *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt (New York: Schocken Books, 1935 [2007]); Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (New York: Verso, 1983 [2006]); Cornelius Castoriadis, *World in Fragments: Writings on Politics, Society, Psychoanalysis, and the Imagination*, trans. David Ames Curtis (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1997).

³¹ Bruno Latour, *We have Never been Modern* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1993), pp. 117-20.

³² I am particularly fond of Eduardo Kohn’s recent descriptions of the social practice of imagining the world, Eduardo Kohn, *How Forests Think: Toward an Anthropology Beyond the Human*, (2013).

³³ Micklethwait, John, Wooldridge, Adrian, *A Future Perfect: The Essentials of Globalization* (New York, N.Y.: Crown Business, 2000), p. 336. The idea of grooming people for the coming liberties of democracy echoes Tania Li’s observation that development projects prepare rural subsistence communities for the logics of consumer capitalism discussed in Chapter 2.

not at all what these authors had in mind with this statement, they were thinking of liberal democracy.³⁴

The empire of liberal democracy and global capital, nicely described and vilified by Hardt and Negri in their piece, *Empire*, highlights the smoothed-over tension between deterritorialized capital and the bounded striations of the physical and social fields enacted through modern sovereignty.³⁵ Despite their insights into the processes of Empire, they seem to take as real the illusion of smoothness created by the longer networks of global capital and the mobilities they entail. Their suggestion that the biopolitical control that devalues deterritorialized labor affects all laborers in the same ways³⁶ enhances the illusion of smoothness also cultivated by Appadurai's mediascapes that hold the key for all social imagining.³⁷ Such suggestions read to me like products of the mediated imaginaire of modernity created by people who never leave the air conditioner far behind.

The Cham of Sambok Dung are not-yet mobile subjects who have limited access to mediated forms of communication. They remain subsistence agriculturalists and fishermen and sometimes use car batteries to run a light or charge a cell phone. Their identities are only lightly mediated through television or radio and it is not their labor that is devalued, but their access to land that is being challenged. This moment of contemporary primitive accumulation is smoothed over by Hardt and Negri's sweeping history of Empire in ways that echo the desire for smoothness in the physical landscape cultivated by global development and the seamless

³⁴ For a nice discussion of this process of selective liberty in Burma, see Michael Aung-Thwin, "Parochial Universalism, Democracy Jihad and the Orientalist Image of Burma: The New Evangelism," *Pacific Affairs* 74, no. 4 (Winter, 2002), 483-505.

³⁵ Michael Hardt and Negri, Antonio, *Empire* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2000).

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 344.

³⁷ Appadurai, *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization*, p. 34.

modernizing of imperial debris with new terms like, “environmental degradation”.³⁸ As part of my critique of the smoothness of contemporary global forms I attend to the messy contact zones at the boundaries of empire where, contrary to what globalization theorists suggest, the people maintain some of the means to their own production and the nation-state and nationalism seem to be quite salient.

Hardt and Negri suggest that the strength of local agents of the state serves the ends of Empire.³⁹ This may be the case, but the ways these local forms thwart the decentralization agendas of global governance while enacting their own agendas on local populations suggest their continued salience in people’s lives.⁴⁰ Thomas Blom Hansen notes that while the state may be weakening, the issue is not whether the state is recognized from the outside by other states, but how the state constitutes sovereignty and defines citizenship from within.⁴¹ My story shows the continued salience of the territorial state and of the place-making initiatives of global Islam; it shows individuals and groups connecting to particular identities not as part of an imaginative circus in which all things are possible, but with intentional moves that engender stability and preserve salient identities. It also shows connection to rather than radical separation from the long history of empire to which people in this region have grown accustomed.

A common theme in the literature on globalization is its western origins. This is a myth that I suggest reveals the uncanny haunting of the western scholarly unconscious, as if by ignoring other imperial histories their influence can be erased. This smoothing of history goes hand-in-hand, I suggest, with the devaluing of non-Western global processes. Globalization

³⁸ Stoler, *Introduction "the Rot Remains": From Ruins to Ruination*, p. 18.

³⁹ Hardt and Negri, *Empire*, p. 342.

⁴⁰ Caroline Hughes and Kheang Un, *Cambodia's Economic Transformation* (Copenhagen: NIAS Press, 2012); Aihwa Ong, "Powers of Sovereignty: State, People, Wealth, Life," *Focaal* 2012, no. 64 (2012), 24.

⁴¹ Thomas Blom Hansen and Finn Stepputat, *Sovereign Bodies: Citizens, Migrants, and States in the Postcolonial World* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2005), p. 22.

should not be confounded with westernization,⁴² both because the conflation assumes a single node to a plural process and because it leaves non-Western forms of capital open for vilification. When we “brush history against the grain” as Walter Benjamin suggests we do,⁴³ we find the silenced bits of imperial debris, transformed by its continual smoothing. What I have presented thus far of imperial spread and global processes in the east not only confounds Eurocentric scholarship, but also illuminates the ways that the Cham of Cambodia identify with and attach to the imperial forms of global Islam that have long been at their disposal.

In their critique, Hardt and Negri call for a resistance to Empire and its plural nodes of power, a call with which I agree. The next section examines western academic literature from the contemporary era that recounts with alarm the growing influence of global Islam among Cambodia’s Cham, as if the tyranny of democracy and development were not a concern. Benjamin Barber makes a productive comparison between Jihad and McWorld along these lines, suggesting that they are both anarchic, mutually constitutive, and equally exploitative.⁴⁴ My Cham interlocutors are being asked to conform to a purified practice of Islam and give up their place-based ancestor shrines, in exchange for which they will receive religious infrastructure and access to education.⁴⁵ At the same time, Cham and Buddhist alike are being asked by the global market to give up their land for subsistence farming in exchange for wage labor at the plantation. The exploitation of both is apparent. Nonetheless, Hardt and Negri’s vision of the revolutionary

⁴² Amartya Sen, “How to Judge Globalism,” *The American Prospect*, 2002, A2; Prasenjit Duara, *Rescuing History from the Nation: Questioning Narratives of Modern China* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995).

⁴³ Walter Benjamin, “Thesis on the Philosophy of History,” in *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*, trans. Hannah Arendt (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1968), p. 257.

⁴⁴ Benjamin R. Barber, *Jihad Vs. McWorld* (New York: Times Books, 1995).

⁴⁵ It is interesting to note that the same is happening with international aid that supports Buddhist agendas. Funding goes only to those monks and temples who practice reformed Buddhism and not to those who continue to cultivate relationships with spirits or more magical ascetic projects. See, Ian Charles Harris, “Entrepreneurialism and Charisma: Two Modes of Doing Business in Post-Pol Pot Cambodian Buddhism,” in *Expressions of Cambodia: The Politics of Tradition, Identity, and Change*, eds. Leakthina Chan-Pech Ollier and Tim Winter (London; New York: Routledge, 2006), p. 172.

proletariat misses the very real desire that the disenfranchised have for the material and ideational productions of imperial forms and the importance of protection in acts of daily subsistence amid relationships of unequal power.⁴⁶

Friedman suggests that the global works on the “distribution of conditions of social existence” and how that plays out on the ground.⁴⁷ In the case of global Islam this distribution travels on the ground from the hands of cosmopolitan transnational merit-makers who present not the “difference and diversity” that Friedman suggests,⁴⁸ but rather, cultivate the hegemony of elite classes. This hegemony of the elite projects not only adherence to particular types of religious practice, but also ideals that are in keeping with the tenants of major western donors: the values of education, of infrastructure, and of charity.

Samuel Huntington wants to suggest a “clash of civilizations” from which the coming world order must protect itself.⁴⁹ The similarities between the various civilizations that Huntington presents seem to outweigh the differences, and I suggest warping Huntington’s idea of the clash to present something more like a civilizational marketplace, in which actors can choose to attach themselves to various forms of institutionalized domination. This is not necessarily new, especially in Southeast Asia where detaching from a bad king could be accomplished through a change of location,⁵⁰ an option taken by the Cham who fled Vietnamese rule rather than face assimilation. Of course the technological networks are longer and people are

⁴⁶ Hardt and Negri suggest resistance to empire in the classical strike, revolutionary, collective resistance model of previous eras, even though the Empire they describe is in no way like the others. This problem of protection and fear that sits at the heart of Empire, whether nationalized or globalized, entails access to land and subsistence. The institutionalized global cooptation of planetary resources can only be resisted passively. It is through consumption and labor that the proletariat feeds the empire and it is our fear of death that directs us toward its abuse rather than away from it. The inner revolution they seek is our own power to die.

⁴⁷ Friedman, *Globalization, the State, and Violence*, p. xiv.

⁴⁸ Ibid., p. 14.

⁴⁹ Samuel P. Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996).

⁵⁰ O. W. Wolters, *History, Culture, and Region in Southeast Asian Perspectives* (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 1982).

forced into choices; opting out of imperial domination is no longer on the table. There is a homogenizing tenor to the choices of domination available in the contemporary global marketplace, despite the differences of dress and comportment requested of each civilizing option. For the Cham in Sambok Dung, they have attached themselves to a source of power that enhances their material existence on the ground and that fosters group identity without radical disjuncture.

The Clash of Civilizations?

The Cham history of imperial conquest, contact, and disruption mocks contemporary scholarship that marvels at the disjuncture and displacement of the current phase of globalization. There is some contestation about when and how the majority of Cham began to identify with Islam, but the globalizing processes of multiple expanding empires created a contact zone in which this identification was possible. My friend Slieman tells us that when the king fell, there was no Islam, only the religion of the original Cham. Scholars agree that the expanding Viet force that finally marked the fall of Vijaya gave rise to the first mass emigration to Cambodia,⁵¹ but Collins also attributes this period with the large-scale conversion of the Northern Cham to Islam, citing as cause the rise of the Mughals in India and increased missionary and trade activities in the same era.⁵² Nakamura, however, finds Islamic influence in the area of northern Champa as early as the 4th century, well before their defeat at Vijaya,⁵³ and Anthony Reid cites Champa as the

⁵¹ Michael Vickery, "Champa Revisited," in *The Cham of Vietnam History, Society, and Art*, eds. Bruce McFarland Lockhart and Kỳ Phương Trần (Singapore: NUS Press, 2011); Georges Maspéro, *La Royaume De Champa* (Paris et Bruxelles: G. van Oest, 1928); Étienne Aymonier, *Le Champa Et Les Chams* (Paris: École Française d'Extrême Orient, 1920).

⁵² Collins, *The Chams of Cambodia*, p. 7-8a.

⁵³ Rie Nakamura, "The Coming of Islam to Champa," *Journal of the Malaysian Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society (JMBRAS)* 73 (2000), 55-66.

earliest Southeast Asian center of Islamic influence starting around the 10th century.⁵⁴ The globalizing tendencies of imperial formations unmoored residents in the Champa kingdom and sent them travelling into a region already filled with the movement and disjuncture of Empire.

Once dispersed from their homeland, they settled along the rivers of Cambodia. Their routes of migration are unknown, but it is likely that they encountered the Malaysian communities that had spread by that time along the coastlines of what is today the gulf of Thailand.⁵⁵ Some scholars agree with Slieman and contend that the first wave of Cham migrants were not Muslim, but became Muslim when they met with the already established Muslim Malays in southern Cambodia,⁵⁶ but the majority contend that the first migrants to Cambodia were already Muslim converts.⁵⁷ All these assertions must be tempered by the fragmentary evidence of early Islamic influence on the Cambodian side, and as Collins points out, Islamic conversion in Cambodia was not an event, but rather “a long, slow process of cultural contact”.⁵⁸ The concern with Islamicity manifests the concerns of the historians producing knowledge for the empire, perhaps unconscious as de Certeau suggests but certainly at odds with the data created and compiled by the players during the era of disruption, which attended to issues of history, magical prowess, trade, territory, and power.⁵⁹

⁵⁴ Anthony Reid, *Southeast Asia in the Age of Commerce, 1450-1680*, Vol. 2 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988).

⁵⁵ Hussin Mutalib, *Islam and Ethnicity in Malay Politics* (Singapore: Oxford University Press, 1990), p. 6.

⁵⁶ Maspéro, *La Royaume De Champa*, p. 14-15.

⁵⁷ Po Dharma, *Le Pāṇḍuraṅga (Campā), 1802-1835: Ses Rapports Avec Le Vietnam* (Paris: Ecole française d'Extrême-Orient, 1987); Mak Phoeun, "Note Sur Les Premiers Établissements Des Cam Et Des Malais Dans Les Provinces De Châu-Dốc Et De Tây-Ninh (Sud Du Vietnam)," in *Colloque International: "Péninsule Indochinoise Et Monde Malais: Relations Historiques Et Culturelles"*, eds. Po Dharma and Mak Phoeun. (Kuala Lumpur: Ministry of Culture, Arts and Tourism Malaysia: Ecole française d'Extrême-Orient, 2003); Etienne Aymonier, *Le Cambodge*, Vol. III (Paris: E. Leroux, 1904), p. 748.

⁵⁸ Collins, *The Chams of Cambodia*, p. 12a.

⁵⁹ William Noseworthy, "A Southeast Asian Palimpsest: Akhar Thrah 1700 - Present" (M.A., University of Wisconsin-Madison); Mak Phoeun, *Chroniques Royales Du Cambodge* (Paris: Ecole française d'Extrême-Orient, 1981).

The long and slow process of cultural contact between the Cham, the Khmer, and the Muslims of Malaysia reached its height in the sixteenth century when the Cambodian Cham were acknowledged as an economic force in the region.⁶⁰ The significance of this era of powerful Cham traders remains in the word Kompong, the Cham word for trading port, used in three major central Cambodian provinces along the Mekong and Tonle rivers: Kompong Cham, Kompong Thom, and Kompong Chhnang. The conversion of the Khmer King Ramadhipati to Islam, becoming King Ibrahim in the seventeenth century, attests to the rising influence of Islam and the Cham in the region; Ibrahim's court and projects of higher Islamic education pointed to Patani (now in southern Thailand) and to Kota Bharu in Kelantan, Malaysia.⁶¹

Malaysia was and remains the Southeast Asian center for the dissemination and interpretation of Islam. Many texts were translated from the Arabic and Persian into Malay,⁶² And it is suggested that the final fall of the Champa kingdom at Panduranga in the nineteenth century was exacerbated by Malay missionaries. At the time, there was great Viet pressure on the Cham to culturally assimilate, and the missionaries who went to Panduranga lead a revolt that failed and brought about the final collapse of Champa.⁶³ Cham resistance to cultural assimilation reverberates in the colonial era and during the early years of Khmer Rouge influence in eastern Cambodia. But interestingly, Malaysian assimilations are far less problematic. Many Cham sought refuge from Pol Pot's disruptions in Malaysia, joining a small, but established and nationally recognized community of Cham. Since the fall of Pol Pot, the enlarged Malaysian

⁶⁰ Adhémar Leclère, *Histoire Du Cambodge Depuis Le 1^{er} siècle De Notre ère, d'après Les Inscriptions Lapidaires, Les Annales Chinoises Et Annamites Et Les Documents européens Des Six Derniers siècles*, (Paris: P. Geuthner, 1914), p. 348.

⁶¹ Bruckmayr. Philipp, "The Cham Muslims of Cambodia: From Forgotten Minority to Focal Point of Islamic Internationalism," *The American Journal of Islamic Social Sciences*. 23, no. 3 (2006), p. 2.

⁶² Ronit Ricci, *Islam Translated: Literature, Conversion, and the Arabic Cosmopolis of South and Southeast Asia* (Chicago; London: University of Chicago Press, 2011), p. 50.

⁶³ Bruckmayr. Philipp, *The Cham Muslims of Cambodia: From Forgotten Minority to Focal Point of Islamic Internationalism*, 1-23

community of Cham increased Malaysian influence among Cambodia's Cham through efforts to rebuild religious infrastructure.

Before discussing Islamic influence and conversions in the contemporary era, I will continue along the teleological narrative of empire and discuss the so-called modern era. Bjorn Blengsli suggests Cambodia's Cham Muslim minority is the most rapidly changing in both Southeast Asia and the Muslim world at this time.⁶⁴ In honor of the imperial grammar begun in the colonial era I will offer some brief statistics of current Cham populations and dispersal and then will turn to an overview of twentieth and twenty-first century historical trajectories in Cambodia that influence the lives of contemporary Cham. This historical construction will follow the stories recounted by *Tun Dī*, *Tuen Ja*, and *Sleiman*, articulating them to the linear progression of empire.

The current population figures for Cham in Cambodia conflict widely, with the lowest estimate at around 400,000 persons and the highest around 800,000. The numbers vary, but there seems to be agreement that they make up about 5% of the Cambodian population.⁶⁵ The majority Cham group in Cambodia, to which *Tuen Ja* and *Tun Di* belong, make-up about 80% of the total population, and today live primarily in Kompong Cham, the group of Malaysian Muslims, known in Cambodia as the *Chvea*, live in the south in Kampot, and the *Jahed*, are mostly concentrated in the villages west of the Sap river between Oudong and Battambang.⁶⁶ This population dispersal has changed little through the twentieth century. Even after the forced migrations of the Khmer Rouge, the Cham returned to natal villages and livelihoods along the

⁶⁴ Bjorn Blengsli, "Muslim Metamorphosis: Islamic Education and Politics in Contemporary Cambodia," in *Making Modern Muslims: The Politics of Islamic Education in Southeast Asia*, ed. Robert W. Hefner (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2009).

⁶⁵ Mutalib, *Islam and Ethnicity in Malay Politics*, p. 71.

⁶⁶ Mathieu Guérin, "Les Cam Et Leur "Véranda Sur La Mecque": L'Influence Des Malais De Patani Et Du Kelantan Sur L'Islam Des Cam Du Cambodge," *Aséanie, Sciences Humaines En Asie Du Sud-Est*, (14) 2004, pp. 29-67.

Mekong and Tonle rivers and self-segregated themselves into groups reflecting historical practice. In this century we have Cham all over the globe, as Tun Dī tells us, but in Cambodia they occupy the same territories as in generations past. Further, as discussed in Chapter 1, current migrations and displacements seem to favor community cohesion rather than dispersal into the wider Khmer landscape, which serves to maintain rather than dissolve Cham territoriality and identity, disrupting again the rumored disjuncture of Empire.

In the colonial era, the Cham went from being regionally recognized as successful traders along the rivers of Cambodia to marginalization and disenfranchisement due to their resistance to French assimilationist maneuvers. The Cham were unwilling to send their children to the French schools; fearing culture loss they refused to give up their Cham language instruction. James Clifford describes the lived experiences of diasporic communities as zones of both separation and entanglement; at once here, with them, and decidedly from there and separate.⁶⁷ Maintaining the cultural markers that define the Cham as a group remains important into the present and informs their separations from and entanglements with various waves of imperial power. That their lack of fluency in French kept an entire generation from access to the elite positions of the bureaucracy was perhaps an unintended consequence of their decision to privilege the Cham language over French. My conversations with Cham in Sambok Dung typically included reference to their parent's generation, but only two references to grandparents and both involved engagements with the French; one had a grandparent who did factory work in Phnom Penh and the other was a woodcutter in Pursat province. The absence of Cham from the colonial machine seems also to engender an absence from history, both the history produced in the scholarly arena and in their own retellings of their pasts.

⁶⁷ James Clifford, *Routes: Travel and Translation in the Late Twentieth Century* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1997), p. 257.

They re-enter history during the Sangkum period, when Sihanouk affixed the label ‘Khmer Islam’ upon the Cham and all Cambodian Muslims in a nation building move to include the excluded populations; also known as assimilation. This assimilation was not strongly opposed at the time and the term ‘Khmer Islam’ remains in use. It was used as a self-referent by a few of my informants in Sambok Dung and in this context it seems to have circumvented the intended homogenizing and nationalizing effect that would connect the Cham to the Khmer. Instead, its continued usage fluidly alongside the more common *janajāti Cham* and *janajāti Islam* collectivizes Cambodian Muslims and marks them as racially separate and united. Relations between the different sects of Cham are marked, but ebb and flow over time between passive co-existence and reformist tensions.

In the 1950s a conservative movement from Malaysia, called Kaum Muda, cooked up tensions between the *Jahed* and the Cham, insisting on purification of *Jahed* practice. This tension became so heated by the 1960s that Sihanouk exiled two imams to Thailand.⁶⁸ The influence of Kaum Muda did not disappear after this, but the proselytizing became less militant. If purification is one side of the contemporary imperial mint, nationalism is the other and in the 1960s a prominent Cham leader, Les Kosem, rose to power in Lon Nol’s army and was able to forge an alliance with highland and Vietnamese Cham that made a brief bid for the return of Cham sovereignty. This move does demonstrate the extent of Cham ethnic solidarity, but it would be more appropriate to view the call for sovereignty in terms of the fashions of empire during this era of factionalism and separatism in Southeast Asia.

⁶⁸ Bruckmayr, Philipp, *The Cham Muslims of Cambodia: From Forgotten Minority to Focal Point of Islamic Internationalism*, pp. 2-4. This incident is part of ongoing vacillations between purified and traditional Islam in Cambodia. See also, Osman Ysa, *The Cham Rebellion: Survivor's Stories from the Villages* (Phnom Penh, Cambodia: Documentation Center of Cambodia, 2006), p. 77.

With the ouster of Sihanouk, Kosem and his Cham battalion participated vigorously in the American War on the side of Lon Nol. The enthusiastic persecution of Khmer Rouge territories on the part of Kosem's battalion during the war is one explanation for what was considered to be excessive aggression against the Cham by the Khmer Rouge. While there is evidence of large communities of Cham revolutionaries fighting with the Khmer Rouge before 1975, especially in the eastern regions that encompassed Kompong Cham, by 1973 Cham enthusiasm for the KR waned after campaigns to suppress their religious practice. The Khmer Rouge project of social homogenization was violently opposed by the Cham, who rejected the suppression of their religion and Cham identity. Cham rejection of Khmer Rouge directives were met with extreme force and entire communities were decimated in the early 1970s for refusing to turn over their copies of the Qur'an. Whether or not the Cham suffered disproportionately during the Khmer Rouge, a claim made by many, is difficult to tell.⁶⁹ My own ethnographic data suggests two things.

The first is that Ysa Osman's claim that KR persecution of Cham communities was predicated upon their solidarity and capacity for group mobilization may have some salience.⁷⁰ The Cham of Sambok Dung do exhibit strong community coordination. In Chapter one, I related how the Cham former village head allocated land equally, in accordance with the standards of the SLC, one structural effect of which put neighbors into close contact with one another on standard sized plots (aside from that of the former village head, whose plot was larger). In Chapter two, I pointed out that when the Cham neighborhood accepted the deal from the WFP to raise a road in exchange for rice, they worked quickly and with coordinated efforts. One further

⁶⁹ Ben Kiernan, "Orphans of Genocide: The Cham Muslims of Kampuchea Under Pol Pot," *Critical Asian Studies* 20, no. 4 (1988), 2-33; Collins, *The Chams of Cambodia*; Scupin, *Historical, Ethnographic, and Contemporary Political Analyses of the Muslims of Kampuchea and Vietnam*, 301-328; Ysa, *The Cham Rebellion: Survivors' Stories from the Villages*.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

marker of strong community coordination among the Cham in Sambok Dung is the continued regular functioning of labor exchange in agricultural work. Every family participates in the labor exchange; fields are plowed in succession using all available labor and draft animals and the same system applies to transplanting and harvesting. When the work is done, those with land give rice to those without according to the mouths they have to feed and the hands they used to help.⁷¹

Outside of the village, Pereiro notes that in Cambodia's national assembly, the Cham representatives are grouped together and put at the front of the assembly. Reports from current government officials suggest that this singular honoring of the Cham is done in part out of fear that their Cham counterparts may not continue to count themselves a part of Khmer society and they make efforts to keep them central to state operations.⁷² The second observation from my data on the Khmer Rouge years is that the suffering varied from family to family and from region to region for both the Cham and the Khmer. None of my Cham interlocutors came from the northern areas of the eastern zone, noted in the literature for having suffered extensive losses, and the horror stories I heard from the Cham were no more numerous than those I heard from the Khmer.⁷³

What we do know, however, is that there were Cham in positions of authority during the Khmer Rouge years, most notably, Mat Ly, who later joined the Front for National Salvation of Kampuchea, which defected into Vietnam from the eastern zones and returned to overthrow

⁷¹ This could be a marker of poverty over community coordination. Among the Khmer rice growers, the very poor also pooled labor and shared rice while the wealthier families paid others for their labor.

⁷² Pérez Pereiro, *Historical Imagination, Diasporic Identity and Islamicity among the Cham Muslims of Cambodia*, p. 55.

⁷³ Khmer Rouge atrocities were not, however, the focus of my research and I did not ask pointed questions about people's individual experiences during those years. Rather, I recorded what people offered of their own accord and the ways that the era of that bastard Pot came up as a part of quotidian affairs.

DK.⁷⁴ Mat Ly became a strong voice for Cham interests in the new government of Cambodia after the ouster of the Khmer Rouge from Phnom Penh and was instrumental in getting help to rebuild mosques and replace texts from the international Islamic community. At this time, and still today, people are working to ‘rebuild’ decimated religious traditions in Cambodia, both Buddhist and Cham. For Mat Ly, the Islamic Development Bank gave the first million to reconstruct mosques, providing classrooms, school materials, and religious texts in Malay and Arabic. But international interest was limited until 1988, when Ly got help from financiers in Dubai and Malaysia who helped finance yearly hajj contingents and to continue building and rebuilding mosques and schools.⁷⁵ As part of an active state project of religious inclusion, the Cham were well represented in the PRK government.⁷⁶ They held ten seats in the national assembly as well as two senate seats, and several Cham were district and local representatives. Whether this purposeful inclusion indicates PRK commitment to diversity and representation or suggests the government’s fear of Cham factionalism is difficult to tell. It does position the Cham as a force to be reckoned with, something interestingly erased from the historical memories that the Cham tell about themselves.

Although the transnational and multi-sited nature of global Islam does fit nicely with Hardt and Negri’s de-territorialized notion of the coming empire,⁷⁷ the execution of their influence is ultimately territorial. Relations with the Cambodian government and Cham leaders are instrumental for their organizations, and ties to local communities come through building permanent structures, like mosques, prayer houses, and schools. The empire always comes to a place, and each stop along the massive technological network of the current era is a locality. This

⁷⁴ Bruckmayr, Philipp, *The Cham Muslims of Cambodia: From Forgotten Minority to Focal Point of Islamic Internationalism*, p. 5-6.

⁷⁵ Ibid., pp. 6-7.

⁷⁶ Michael Vickery, *Cambodia, 1975-1982* (Boston, MA: South End Press, 1984).

⁷⁷ Hardt and Negri, *Empire*.

problem of emplacement disrupts Appadurai's popular idea of "global flows" that are plagued by "disjuncture and difference", but does speak to his notions of locality as a constantly negotiated and constructed space.⁷⁸ It is not the multiplicity of disjunctive flows that mark difference among the Cham in Sambok Dung. Rather, the difference is marked by individual capacities to attach themselves to flows of capital and influence floating on the incoming tide of empire.

The Cambodian Cham of the current era have political representation, as I have mentioned. Their numbers have declined since the early 1980s, but the capacity of Cham leaders remains strong, and many urban Cham are rising with the economic tide of the current empire.⁷⁹ The Cambodian government diverges from modern imperial grammar of secularism and claims Buddhism as the national religion, but in keeping with the assimilationist grammar of the state it bans the hijab in school. Further, what education there is in Cambodia renders the Cham as an ethnic minority and does not attend to Cham history or identity. Even though the great murals of Angkor depict the Champa kingdom as a powerful foe finally conquered, this part of Cham history is not what the Cham I know tell of themselves. They are the conquered and dispersed race, taking care of each other and seeking protection from the more powerful. The forgetting of history is partly encouraged by conservative sects, but also selectively negotiated: conforming to and not threatening the dominant culture is also a powerful incentive for forgetting.

Despite governmental representation and access to international aid, the Cham in Cambodia remain quite poor and disenfranchised⁸⁰ and one of the main difficulties for the Cham families I know is their minority status and its attendant economic and social problems. The ever deepening encroachment of the Vietnamese into Cham livelihoods, especially through fishing

⁷⁸ Appadurai, *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization*.

⁷⁹ Bruckmayr, Philipp, *The Cham Muslims of Cambodia: From Forgotten Minority to Focal Point of Islamic Internationalism*, p. 20.

⁸⁰ Mutalib, *Islam and Ethnicity in Malay Politics*, p. 80.

lots on the Tonle Sap lake, manifests in the way our three interlocutors describe the role of the Yuen in their histories and also opens a space of common ground between the Cham and the Khmer. Vietnamese influence, migration, and territorial claims to Cambodia are a source of tension for both Khmer and Cham citizens of the Kingdom of Cambodia. Economic fishing concessions awarded to Vietnamese companies are especially damaging to Cham fishermen and for the Khmer this encroachment advances accusations of Vietnamese favoritism against the ruling party. The Cham and the Khmer share a fear of Vietnamese power and infiltration; yet despite this connection, the Cham still feel their minority status. While we were talking about conversions one of my friends said, *the country has a Buddhist government, so the Khmer have the government, we Cham, we have the Malaysians*. The defining feature of modernity for the Cham of Sambok Dung seems to be the imperial choices open to them.

The Cham have particular experience with imperial choices and it may be suggestive that attachment to the Vietnamese empire was never an option for them while protection from the Khmer king was. The way that Cham distaste for the Vietnamese comes out in their historical reconstructions certainly connects to contemporary narratives of encroachment and displacement. In both versions of the histories recounted by Tun Dī, Tuen Ja, and Sleiman, the righteous ruler commits fatal mistakes and Vietnam is the lowly upstart turned aggressor, always hungry for land. It is equally the case, however, that Vietnamese historical domination may also fold into contemporary narratives. It is that domination that connects Cham fears to the Khmer concerns over territory. Nonetheless, the imperial choice for contemporary Cham is global Islam. They reside in the Kingdom of Cambodian, but that state is Buddhist and does not attend to Cham needs as an Islamic population. The relations between the Cham, the Khmer, the Vietnamese, and the Malaysian and Arabic branches of global Islam in some ways depict

Huntington's clash of civilizations, especially as the Cham attachment to Malaysia and the Arab states is based not on territory but on religion. What I have tried to depict here is not a clash, however, but rather choices made available to agentive communities. This is not simply domination; global capital offers much desired material and ideational services to particular populations. The next section will describe how the services of the Islamic community entered the lives of Cambodian Cham.

Conversions

After the UN sponsored elections in 1993, many exiled Cham returned from Malaysia and international Islamic organizations took a larger role rehabilitating Cham religious infrastructure. Contacts between Cambodian Cham and Malaysia renewed and expanded as did relations with many Arab countries, especially Kuwait and Saudi Arabia. Although all are engaged in teaching and mosque building, they seem to have distinctive roles. The Malaysian Dakwah Tabligh movement is now considered a 'major force' influencing Islamic practice among Cambodian Cham.⁸¹ Among the donors from Arab countries, the Kuwait organization, Revival of Islamic Heritage Society (RIHS), is the most prolific mosque builder and is also involved in publishing religious texts in the Cham language. The RIHS is responsible for the bright new prayer house in Sambok Dung. But for all Islamic based international funding, there is no money or offerings for communities whose practice is not in line with the funders. This, I suggest, is not a clash of civilizations, as Huntington suggests. It is rather the competition of imperial grammars, presented on the market for intentional actors to purchase and align themselves with as they see fit.

⁸¹ Omar Farouk and Hiroyuki Yamamoto, "Islam at the Margins: The Muslims of Indochina" (Kyoto, Japan, CIAS, 2008).

This fact of funding is leading to substantial conversions among Cambodian Cham from both the Jahed sect and from the less purified Cham. It is funding, but more importantly, it is the way that funding buttresses faith and connects people to God through the evidence of prosperity. The Cham of Cambodia are adopting conservative forms of practice that result in group inclusion, financial support, building projects, student scholarships, and sponsorship for the Hadj. I was told that in the towns of Battambang and Pursat, over 8 villages that once were adherents of Imam San are now practicing a more conservative form of Islam, and I am told that there remained only one Imam San village in Pursat and two in Battambang.⁸²

Conversion is on the rise and all three of our story tellers from the village had attended the *ijtima'ah* (pronounced istema), an event held annually by the Dakwah Tabligh at its original site in the village of Trea, in Kampong Cham, and also in villages of Battambang and Kampong Chhnang. The *ijtima'ah* was described to me as a sort of religious revival, it is a three day event and some said it was the most important annual celebration. In describing this event, one 40-year-old rice farmer told me, *it is where we go to purify ourselves and cleanse our sins: We listen to them talk and we make merit. They do this all over the Arab world, but now we do it here in Cambodia. The Thai do it too, in Thailand.* So, people are attending these *ijtima'ah* and purifying their practice in accordance with 'international standards', yet despite international pressures and reform movements, individual practices continue to show wide variation. Cham dress in Sambok Dung exhibits this: women can be found wearing headscarfs, the traditional *kramā*, or the black *purdah*⁸³ and men wear fez or turbans, as they choose (Photo 4a, 4b, and 4c). There were none from Sambok Dung who wore the full *Purdha*, but in the neighboring market

⁸² This phenomenon of conversion of the *Jahed* community in the villages between Oudong and Battambang is worthy of further investigation.

⁸³ Bruckmayr. Philipp, *The Cham Muslims of Cambodia: From Forgotten Minority to Focal Point of Islamic Internationalism*, pp. 11-14.

town I did see a few women wearing it. Beyond outward expressions of Islamic allegiance through dress, differences in practice were also evident.

Because I did not live with a Cham family in the Cham neighborhood of Sambok Dung, my data are not conclusive. People reported to me that they prayed 5 times a day; they also missed prayers without concern while sitting talking with me for hours. When I noticed the ignored call to prayer, I was informed that one can pray or not as is convenient. One thirty-year-old mother of 3 told me, *we want to pray five times, but it is really only the old ones who can do that. Most of us are too busy. The most important is in the evening....* This sentiment echoes the Khmer approach to the 5 precepts of Buddhism, it is really only expected of the old—nobody else has time. In only one household did anyone excuse themselves when the call to prayer sounded. Another way that Cham practice in Sambok Dung varies from family to family is in their treatment of the dead. This element of Cham practice needs more in-depth research than my discussions brought out, but my inquiries did uncover the practice of making offerings directly to the spirits of the recently dead, a practice that should have been purified. The multiple expressions of Islam in Cambodia speak to a long engagement with the practice that is shifting now with the winds of conservative reform, but could shift in other directions as well.

In recent times Islamic leaders have a voice in the government, which both promotes investment in Islamic communities and moderates conservative interventions. In the early 2000s tensions built up between the majority Sunni Muslims and the RIHS groups funded through Kuwait. The Sunni majority of Cambodia was displeased by the stance of the international donors and a statement by the mufti is worth quoting at length:

[b]efore the Pol Pot regime we had only two branches of Islam. We had custom and the religion mixed together and we had the branch which follows Champa... In 1993 we got the new religion from Arabia. When it came, the believers of the

new religion accused all Muslims... of having a religion which was no good. Only the Arab group is good.⁸⁴

Reformist tensions were put down by the Mufti and the leaders of RIHS pledged loyalty to the local authorities and joined the CPP. This incident presents both the purified cosmopolitanism that seems to adhere to empire in general, and an important and largely ignored attribute of the Cambodian People's Party's (CPP) strict patrimonial system. The patronage ties that inform the political economy of Cambodia have their negative impacts,⁸⁵ but this instance shows how powerful they can be by forcing external concerns to join with the ruling party if they want to get anything done. In this way, Cambodia has been able to mandate moderate action in relationships with religious organizations.⁸⁶

The Cham I know from Sambok Dung align themselves with the more conservative practice associated especially with the Dakwah Tabligh from Malaysia. While they advocate for a certain type of practice, a peaceful, if disdainful, stand is taken toward those who choose differently. The evening prayers chanted over the loudspeaker each night in Sambok Dung preach coexistence and forgiveness for those who 'do not know' the true path. When Slieman talked about his conversion, he said, *it was simple. I joined them and they taught me, so now I*

⁸⁴ Cited from, Blengsli, *Muslim Metamorphosis: Islamic Education and Politics in Contemporary Cambodia*, p. 188.

⁸⁵ This tight patrimonial network is much lamented in the literature on democratization and decentralization. See, Sreang Chheat et al., *A Baseline Survey of Sub-National Government: Towards a Better Understanding of Decentralisation and Deconcentration in Cambodia* (Phnom Penh: CDRI; Vidyāsthān Paṇṭuḥ Paṇṭāl niñ Srāvjrāv toempī Qabhivaḍḍhn Kambujā, 2011); Heng, Seiha., Kim, Sedara., So, Sokbunthoeun., Vidyāsthān Paṇṭuḥ Paṇṭāl niñ Srāvjrāv Toempī Qabhivaḍḍhn Kambujā, *Decentralised Governance in a Hybrid Polity: Localisation of Decentralisation Reform in Cambodia* (Phnom Penh, Cambodia: CDRI, 2011); Sheila Dominique Rita Scopis, "Cambodia's String Economy" University of Melbourne, Department of Resource Management and Geography); Luyna Ung, "Industrial Development: An Option for Diversifying Cambodian Economy" Supreme National Economic Council; Cambodia Economic Forum 4, 2011).

⁸⁶ This is true of Christian groups as well, but is outside the scope of this paper.

know: before I didn't know. Along this line, my interlocutors translated the term *Jahed*, not as pious or devout, as I found in the literature, but as *those who don't know*.⁸⁷

This distain folds into the hierarchies floating on the incoming imperial tide, defined by access to resources and education. None of the Cham I met in Sambok Dung or in the surrounding towns could speak Arabic, but I was repeatedly told that the most pious Muslims chant the Qur'an in Arabic, if you don't know Arabic you use Malay, or you can use Cham. The international donors, in addition to building mosques and proselytizing, are also helping to fund foreign education. With access to education and deep religious training, the ignorance of others becomes salient. The stories about what is proper, what a true Muslim should know, found the boundary between the reformed and the ignorant that is enunciated by practice. These stories, de Certeau suggests, "authorize the establishment, displacement or transcendence of limits."⁸⁸ The stories of education and the value of Arabic help to re-define the limits of Muslim practice, but the acts that bring reformed practice into being are acts of state, of empire. International Islamic aid founds schools, builds mosques, and grooms citizens through education and training in the places from which the capital flows, echoing colonial practices in the region and folding into the long-standing relationship between Malaysia and Cambodian Chams.

The capital and organizations of international Islamic aid enters the lives of Cambodian Cham along the trails of empire, through building and education projects that highlight both the benefits of their institutions and the means to access the subsistence they provide. The efforts at development and aid tell a story different from, but similar to the story of global development, in which the empire is providing access to what the native populations need. I am compelled, at this juncture to pose a series of questions that I cannot answer. How is it that global Islam is seen as,

⁸⁷ Pereiro notes that the term *Jahed* is considered derogatory by the Imam San: Pérez Pereiro, *Historical Imagination, Diasporic Identity and Islamicity among the Cham Muslims of Cambodia*, p. 50.

⁸⁸ deCerteau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, p. 123.

referred to as, a religious phenomenon? What about this movement of capital and ideas suggests religion? Coupled with the folding of land spirits into the term 'religion' causes me to wonder what this term is *doing*. What does 'religion' mean in this context? The critique of 'religion' as a category is not new,⁸⁹ and the disarticulation of institutions deemed religious from those deemed political despite their profound interconnectedness continues to haunt the stories of social scientists and political philosophers.⁹⁰

Despite the ways that religion haunts the state in this context, there is a distinct undercurrent of belonging and community that attends Cham connections to Malaysia and to the Arab world. The idea that the Cambodian Cham are *connected* is very important to people. This resonates with the communities enunciated through the rituals of the spirit, except for their non-local character. My friend Tun Dī tells us that the Cham left Champa with the fall of the king, *and now there are Cham in all the countries, since the oldest time: in Kampuchea, in India, in America, we have Cham*. The Cham are in the world. This cosmopolitan existence, for my interlocutors, is an important part of the stories they tell about themselves. The literature shows a broad history of travel and learning among the Cham, my friend's stories confirm such deep connections with Malaysia. But, I am told that before Pol Pot there was very little contact with the Arab countries. All the Islamic texts were Malay translations and higher education was most

⁸⁹ Tomoko Masuzawa, *The Invention of World Religions, Or, how European Universalism was Preserved in the Language of Pluralism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005); Jason Ānanda Josephson, *The Invention of Religion in Japan* (Chicago; London: The University of Chicago Press, 2012); Talal Asad, *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2003); Fenella Cannell, "The Anthropology of Secularism," *Annual Review of Anthropology* 39 (2010), 85-100; McCutcheon, Russell T., "Manufacturing Religion the Discourse on Sui Generis Religion and the Politics of Nostalgia," Oxford University Press; Daniel L. Pals, "Is Religion a Sui Generis Phenomenon?" *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 55, no. 2 (Summer, 1987), 259-282.

⁹⁰ Carl Schmitt, *Political Theology: Four Chapters on the Concept of Sovereignty*, trans. George Schwab (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985[1922]); Jacques Derrida, "Force of Law: The 'Mystical Foundation of Authority'," in *Acts of Religion*, ed. Gil Anidjar (New York: Routledge, 2002); Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998); Sven-Olov Wallenstein, "The Reign and the Glory: Giorgio Agamben and the Theological Origins of Political Philosophy," *Site* 20, no. 2 (2007), 2-4.

often pursued in Malaysia. The need for assistance born of the destruction of Islamic material culture by the Khmer Rouge, coupled with the profound displacements of that same rupture, introduces a new sense of being part of a larger Islamic world. I think it's important that Tun Dī brings up this larger world twice, and in two historic registers: the violence of the historic Cham diaspora is conflated with the violence of their most recent dispersal, through which the Cham now touch many communities in the world.

The touch has a personal quality for the Cham I know and their sense of belonging to a wider Islamic world is transmitted through traveling persons engaged in charitable works: a register that is far different from the NGOs, banks, and development projects that villagers conflate with the state. Despite their similarities, global development and global Islam tell very different stories about themselves. Charity is an important part of the yearly cycle of Islamic observance among my Cham interlocutors; the land poor help the landed with their rice harvests and in turn receive a portion of the rice. Those who have enough are obligated, by Islamic law it is emphasized, to give to those in need. *We Cham help each other*, was a common refrain. They describe offerings at the *maulid*, the new-year celebration of Muhammad's birthday, and *Ramadan*, the annual month of fasting, as times when the rich give to the poor. These stories include local acts of charity and caretaking, which is very important and mentioned often, but they also describe donations received from international donors.

The donations of texts, of houses of worship, and of cows that come from Malay and Arab organizations are not faceless donations. Rather, members of the organization come personally to give to the people in need. Slieman describes his experience in Phnom Penh, when groups of Arabs and Malaysians walked door to door in his neighborhood, visiting with people

and handing out gifts of money and food. Tuen Ja describes the annual donation of a cow for the feast at the last day of Ramadan by describing the people who brought the cow:

They came from Malaysia. They traveled here to the village along the difficult roads to bring us the cow for our feast. There were eight or ten of them, and they came here to share with us. We are all in the same family. They helped us to build our prayer house, and now we are like family. They come every year to help us.

Many of the donations made by the international groups are not seen as institutional, bureaucratic functions. These are personal relationships forged along the tenants of Islamic law.

While there are some concerns about the aggressively conservative stance taken by many of the international Islamic donors, the sentiment among the villagers I worked with is one of community, peace, and mutual caretaking. The transnational communities create a world in which the Cham people—dispersed and dismembered through successive acts of war—are now in Malaysia and America. This is a good thing, because they can now come together in a system of mutual support. This is not to say that the projects of the Dawah Tabligh or the RIHS are not at all self-serving in their acts of generosity, but they are no more suspect than any other ‘life bettering’ scheme looking for members. The economically marginal Cham of Sambok Dung are called into relationships that require certain religious practices and in turn are offered material support from the more knowledgeable, Islamic teachers, just as they are called to wage-work on the plantations—giving up subsistence lifestyles to be part of a larger more advanced system of production. Pick a state any state.

Philip Taylor’s interlocutors in Southern Vietnam voice the majority sentiment among the Cham I encountered, which says, *we have always been Muslim- from the beginning to now*. But, Taylor points out, and this is true in Kampuchea as well, that Islam is but one of the

religions to which the Cham have been exposed.⁹¹ I encountered great variety of practice in the small region surrounding my field site, even among the men in this story we find different experiences and individual adherence to particular stories. Slieman tells me that there was no Islam in the early years. He draws a line between the practices he grew up with, which incorporate local beliefs into a Sufi influenced Islam, and the more conservative practice he now holds. For the converted Slieman, the earlier one is not Islam. Others I met say there have always been two types of Islam, one that prays 5 times per day and another that prays only once per week: the latter holds religion in their heart and the former in the book. To the contrary, another man said, *all Cham follow the king, but only the Cham who follow Malaysia put Allah first*. Still others tell me, *we hold our religion in our hearts and we are Islamic more than we are Cham*. *We are all brothers and sisters with the same mother*.

These sentiments compliment and complicate scholarly explanations of identity choices between history and religion, which all speak to the problem of dislocation and immigration and the ways that identification with Islam, rather than with the fallen kingdom of Champa or the adopted kingdom of Cambodia, offers a wider field through which to maintain cultural identity. Taylor suggests that the anthropological question of origins is unimportant to most of the Cham, saying, "the emphasis on Islam over other identities is a means of overcoming differences between members of a local community who maintain diverse connections to other places but who also may be divided by them... solving the problem of too much diversity".⁹² This does not fit with all the diverse Cham groups in Cambodia: the *Jahed* hold Cham history and language and insulate themselves and their group identity in the face of sweeping change. Nonetheless, the many references I heard that encompass us all in one family could certainly be addressing "the

⁹¹ Taylor, *Cham Muslims of the Mekong Delta: Place and Mobility in the Cosmopolitan Periphery*, p. 76-7.

⁹² Ibid., 80.

problem of too much diversity". One *Hakim* in Siem Ream suggested *anything that preceded Islam must be forgotten*.⁹³ There is a forgetting among the Cham I met in Sambok Dung, which I think is evidenced by the difficulty I had in getting at the stories of the fall of Champa and the migration to Cambodia. One man told me, *I can't remember any of the history. I remember the old ones telling it, they all knew the stories. But, I don't know any of them.*

Conclusion

There is a haunting smoothness to the forgetting of the Cham that reconciles history and religion. The stories of ancient kings and connections to the gods of Indic influence disappear under the waters of the incoming tide, but not completely. The stories told of each found spaces where the hardships of the present and the traumas of the past come together.

With this chapter I play with history and make a small intervention into the literature on globalization. With history I make two moves; the first pulls a mythohistoric narrative out of people who did not offer it, and the second places that narrative and other, freely offered, ethnographic data in conversation with scholarly representations of the Cham. Both these moves are underlined by consideration of the problem of historical constructions: mine, theirs, and those created by knowledge-producing imperial academics. The current historical phase of globalized imperial domination is in many ways unprecedented, but the histories constructed by many astute scholars ignore, obscure, or downplay some of the salient processes at play among my friends in Sambok Dung. In conclusion, I will point again to those processes and draw some connections between historical constructions, the global empire(s), and contemporary stories that attend to the state of the present. By articulating the stories of past and present over and in relation to the flow

⁹³ Agnès de Féo, *L'Islamisme à l'Assaut De l'Asie Du Sud-Est* (Paris: SARL, 2004), p. 11.

of imperial projects I present one way that history serves the present and shed light on some of the obscured parts of the imperial story being told and contested.

The global flows of people and ideas have a long history that is especially visible in the diasporic movements of the Cham. The *longue durée* of Asian imperialism as it plays out through Cham history adds one more intervention into the persistent narrative that attempts to present the current tide of imperial expansion as something unique and grounded in European inspired systems of statecraft. I do not attend here to the logics of empire from which such a self-serving narrative position emerges; this is a story for another time.

My purpose here is to think about the ways that systems of domination play into the logics of subsistence, a theme I also discuss in Chapter 3. The ways that my friends in Sambok Dung talked about their current relationship with the material flows and conditions of comportment by which resources are accessed from international Islamic donors resonate with the themes of mutual caretaking and personal insecurity. The deeper implications of the dialectical logic that entangles insecurity, care, and domination will emerge over time, but the agentive stance of submission presents itself as a salient theme.

My reading of Cham migrations shifts attention away from the agentive force of empire that inform the stories of Vietnamese expansion and Islamic influence to focus more on the strategic ways that the Cham addressed these interventions and attached themselves to the protective powers of imperial forms. This reading is informed, unsurprisingly, by the present. Most contemporary treatments of the Cham focus on imperial exploitations, specifically Khmer Rouge brutalities and the encroachments of strings-attached funding offered by the capital flows of global Islam. The focus on the exploitations of contenders to the throne supported by global biopower obscures the small strategies of individual players that will eventually resist such

forces. What I bring forward are the conditions of daily existence that underlie Cham strategies to access resources and in this way shift the narrative from domination to strategy.

The making of history also entails strategy and for my part there was the academic imperative to enter into the conversation of produced knowledge on my subject: the Cham of Cambodia. When I attended again to the literature after many months of deliberate conversations and chance encounters with Cham in Sambok Dung and found that the history of Champa was nowhere in my field notes I was struck by two things. First, that the absence of a historicized sense of belonging did not seem to connect to conditions of exile and spatial dislocation, as some suggest.⁹⁴ My data positions Islam as a marker of group identity which solidified group cohesion for a people unmoored by shifting imperial tides, a theme also present in the literature.⁹⁵ Taylor rejects the group identity theory, suggesting that this position supposes coherent identity among the powerful nodes of the Champa kingdom. This may be correct and I do not cast my identity claims into the deep past. Nonetheless, my second observation was that the ideas of land and location were more prominent in the stories I heard than those of exile and dislocation. All in Sambok Dung came there for the land; something global Islam does not have to offer. What people told me Islam did offer was a community, and one powerful enough to give the Cham state-like protections similar to the Khmer.

Seeking the stories of diaspora and protection under the Khmer king that were not offered freely was admittedly a constructionist move. Nonetheless, it did bear some interesting fruit that suggests two important themes. The first is the issue of land and diaspora. In all versions of the Champa story the Vietnamese make claims to land that disperse the Cham population. The second is the way this Vietnamese resource grab folds into both the present day challenges faced

⁹⁴ Pérez Pereiro, *Historical Imagination, Diasporic Identity and Islamicity among the Cham Muslims of Cambodia*, p. 6; Taylor, *Cham Muslims of the Mekong Delta: Place and Mobility in the Cosmopolitan Periphery*, p. 68.

⁹⁵ Rie Nakamura, "Cham in Vietnam: Dynamics of Ethnicity"), p. 128; Collins, *The Chams of Cambodia*, p. 36B.

by the Cham in Cambodia and to the anti-Vietnamese sentiment of their Khmer neighbors, equally concerned with land.

The Cham do feel marginalized in the Cambodian state, but their sense of group solidarity is a source of strength commented upon by many. Relations with the Cambodian government are not antagonistic, but neither are they paternalistic. The frontier that marks the boundary between the Cham and the Khmer has stood for so long that the bridge is well traversed. Heidegger's bridge suggests a gathering that "brings stream and bank and land into each other's neighborhood."⁹⁶ I think my Cham and Khmer friends would say there is a bridge around and across which they gather and negotiate. The bridge that de Certeau invokes "is ambiguous everywhere"; it both welds together and opposes. Rather than gathering insularities together into the same neighborhood, it marks the line between neighbors and "allows the alien controlled within to appear on the other side."⁹⁷ This bridge is founded by stories that mark the characteristics of interacting subjects; in the stories I have gathered here, this looks like a bridge of empire. The imperial contact zone made present by the stories and the forgetting of the Cham in Sambok Dung is filled with repression and obfuscation, haunted by boundaries that refuse to speak of what crosses them.

⁹⁶ Martin Heidegger, "Building Dwelling Thinking," in *Martin Heidegger*, ed. D. F. Krell (London: HarperPerennial/Modern Thought, 2008), p. 354.

⁹⁷ deCerteau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, p. 128.

Merit in Motion: Temple building and other powerful acts

*The wat can be thought of as the expression of a sort of collective ideal, built, and operated by all for the benefit even—or especially—of those who are otherwise marginal to society... those who are defined by their liminal position between the wild and the civilized. The wat harbors outcasts within...*¹

*It's like we have a real village now. We have the temple and the monks and a place where we can make merit...*²

The incoming tide of global capital currently influencing Buddhist practice in Sambok Dung takes a markedly different shape than that described in the previous chapter. The Cham Muslims of Cambodia are opened to the development aid of international Islamic organizations, access to which requires the secular purification of local practices. The Khmer Buddhists gain access to global capital through the coffers of national elites who direct large portions of their profits into merit-making activities. This rising imperial tide reaches Vatt Phnaṃ Tā `Aū, the Temple at Grandfather Flowing Water's Mountain, through Buddhist monks well-patronized by the growing urban middle class; two monks sponsor temple building in Sambok Dung. The tide also brings elite merit-makers directly to the region patronizing monks and *ācāry* that practice non-purified Buddhist techniques.³ In this chapter, I attend to Buddhist notions of merit and

¹ The term wat is the Khmer language term for the temple, in this dissertation I choose to use the English term. The quote is from, Ashley Thompson, "Buddhism in Cambodia: Rupture and Continuity," in *Buddhism in World Cultures: Comparative Perspectives*, ed. Stephen Berkwitz (Santa Barbara: ABC/CLIO, 2006) p. 151.

² Village mother, age 48.

³ I will explain non-purified practice below; here I want to remark that capital investments from Khmer Buddhists living abroad also influence Buddhist practice and infrastructure in contemporary Cambodia. Ex-patriot investment was minimal in Sambok Dung and that contingent of international donors did not contribute to shaping the practice of my interlocutors. For discussions of the international flows of capital between Khmer Buddhists living abroad and their in-country relatives see, Joanna Sokhoeun Duong, "The Influence of Theravada Buddhism on Spiritual and Social Reforms in Cambodia" California Institute of Integral Studies), 433; Judy Ledgerwood, "Buddhist Ritual and the Reordering of Social Relations in Cambodia," *South East Asia Research* 20, no. 2 (2012), 191-205; Judy L. Ledgerwood, "Buddhist Practice in Rural Kandal Province, 1960 and 2003. an Essay in Honor of may M. Ebihara," in *People of Virtue: Reconfiguring Religion, Power and Moral Order in Cambodia Today*, eds. Alexandra Kent and David P. Chandler (Copenhagen: NIAS press, 2008), 147; Heike Löschmann, "Buddhism and Social Development in Cambodia since the Overthrow of the Pol Pot Regime in 1979," *Siksacakr: Journal of the Center for Khmer Studies* 8-9 (2006-7); John A. Marston, "Desired Ideals: Wat Preah Thammalanka and the Legend of Lok Ta Nen,"

practices of merit-making as I experienced them in the village. In this examination, I highlight the ways that merit articulates social hierarchies and projects of political power through temple offerings and building projects and also adheres to the individual and ephemeral cultivation of effective power. Merit is a flexible idea and a fluid substance that crosses the conceptual boundaries of religion and state and blurs the classifications that distinguish social and imperial systems from the unpredictable and untamable forces of death and regeneration. Merit refuses confinement and persists through time; it traces shadows where it has been and shines brightly under contemporary uses.

The substantive nature of merit marks the boundary where subsistence meets empire; it founds temples and hovers around those who can build and sustain them; it infuses monks who perform efficacious healing techniques and protective rituals; and it underlies the power of *`anak m̃an puṇya*, people with (moral) power pronounced *neak mien bun*, who communicate with spirits of the village and forest and harness amoral and unpredictable power toward beneficial projects.⁴ The many layers of empire's purifying effects are visible by tracing local deployments of merit that adhere to social hierarchy, contribute to the material effects of temples and healing, and that underlie the skills of traditional healers, craftsmen, and musicians. This opens a discussion about the slippery boundaries between religion and magic that articulate with empire in ways that I suggest serve to mask, or perhaps to purify, the amoral nature of power. Attending to merit and its prominent placement in Buddhist doctrine and practice makes it visible as part of the connective tissue of empire invoked by Stoler that attaches people, land, and imperial projects through the complimentary registers of domination and care.

in *People of Virtue: Reconfiguring Religion, Power and Morality in Cambodia Today*, eds. Alexandra Kent and David P. Chandler (Copenhagen: NIAS press, 2008).

⁴ This amoral power can also be harnessed toward social ill and witchcraft. There were incidents of witchcraft in the region of my fieldwork and the witch haunts this chapter, but the large scope of that discussion requires a forthcoming publication.

This chapter did not grow out of the various visible permutations of merit, but rather with an initial dis-ease born of the paucity of villagers with the financial means to build temples and the profound material effects of external merit donations. Effects that transformed grass huts into concrete structures and abused temples into bright and upright places for making merit. Closely examining the work of merit in temple building, however, brought the slippery incongruities of the idea and practice of merit into view. Merit flexes to accommodate lived experience, but also remains attached to the all social forms previously encompassed. The ways that merit is cultivated and discussed in Sambok Dung trace the contours of a few important relations and distinctions that this chapter will try to address. The first is the relation between patrons and clients that emerges along with the substantial qualities of merit; universally accessible, accumulatetable, and transferable, merit forges intimate social bonds of care, inclusion, and exclusion. Merit also founds physical space through the building of temples: acting as both substance and notion it illuminates the performative and binding elements of patronage and the attributes and actions currently associated with great stores of merit. This gives rise to the third, which is the boundary between magic and religion that attends acts of the contemporary Cambodian state as well as those of traditional healers and spirit adepts.

When I asked villagers directly, they made quite clear that making merit entails temple donation and is performed with the objective of obtaining higher rebirth. But, through my time with them I began to see the multiple ways that merit was deployed as a concept that resonates through a variety of powerful projects that touch their lives. Thus, on the surface temples are centers of meritorious action where communal donations and prayer create community bonds. This is certainly part of what goes on; in addition, temples are important nodes in the rhythm of gifting and domination, of authority and subordination, and merit marks the boundary between

the moral, benevolent power attributed to kings and the amoral, capricious power of the spirits. The temple is at once signifier and magnifier, materializing productive social forces and undercutting them by pointing to transcendence.

The moral authority of merit is the string that pulls people into relationships of unequal power with other people (and not with the spirit as described in Chapter 3), creating *ksae*, literally strings, of association and obligation marked by making-merit. Further, the capacity to *make* merit implies that one already *has* merit, and *having* merit attends to both social and metaphysical power. Merit is a substance, it can be accumulated just as it can dissipate; it is also a concept that surrounds and defines the boundaries of morality, of hierarchy, and of protective power. It is the iterative capacity of merit, the rhythms of creation and destruction that attend merit-making projects and define the attributes of those with merit, that makes it a useful medium through which to discuss the potent projects effecting life at the forested edge of rural Cambodia.

In the following pages, I will examine merit in the many forms that I encountered it during my stay in the village of *Sambok Dung*: as manifest in village social and political hierarchies, as part of individual schemes of patronage and potency, and as present in the persons of powerful monks and adepts. This contemporary ethnographic data will be supplemented with stories from other villages, other places, and other times in the Theravada Buddhist world, as well as from theoretical and philosophical treatments found in the Pālī Canon of Theravāda Buddhism, the *trāyapiṭak*. These various sources will help describe the nuanced work of merit that emerged through my observations and questions and takes merit beyond the sacred boundary of the temple and saffron robes of the monk into social and spiritual projects that disrupt the conflation of morality and power implied by sacred boundaries.

Villagers came here to cut fields from the forest, the temples, monks, and captains of industry came behind them, re-founding place with the excess of a long-since-appropriated promise. In the interstitial spaces of that imperial appropriation the concept of merit shifts and undulates between the constructed categories of religion and magic, of forest and village, and of domination and care.

Theoretical Interlude: On Merit

The circumambulation of merit as a substance and a concept moves along acts of sociality that happen with or without the state, like generosity and mindfulness; it moves through powerful acts attached to the rubrics of previous empires and the spirit-power they co-opted, like mind travel or levitation; it adheres in the bodies of kings and informs the Buddha's power; it also provides the foundation for the naturalization of social hierarchy and disproportionate access to resources.

People in Sambok Dung spoke of merit as something one *had* and as something one *made*. One's karmic store of merit or capacity to make merit outlines the parameters of many relationships of unequal power: with fellow villagers, with entitled elites, or with capricious spirits. In northern Thailand, Charles Keyes found that, "merit is conceived almost as a substance that can be possessed... translated into this worldly virtue or power as well as stored up to be used at death to ensure a good rebirth."⁵ The primary concern of my interlocutors was this substantial merit in kammic storage, which determined the life into which one was born and thus social power. Merit is in the service of social power and people *made* merit to add to their kammic storage and improve their own personal rebirth or the rebirth of an ancestor. These

⁵ Charles F. Keyes, "Merit-Transference in the Kammic Theory of Popular Theravāda Buddhism " in *Karma: An Anthropological Inquiry*, eds. Charles F. Keyes and E. Valentine Daniel (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983), p. 270.

relationships operate within the unavoidable logics of patronage from elites and from spirits where ruthless domination and mutual benefit operate in precarious tension.

People also invoked merit as something one *had* that determined or explained access to metaphysical powers. These powers were associated with particularly charismatic and effective healers whose ability to harness power is used for social good. I first heard the term used to describe a young man who was called to the village to consult with a woman about her potential spirit problem, manifest by prolonged, incurable illness. He spent the evening discussing the woman's dreams, symptoms, and the history of her illness; he laughed and joked with the neighbors who had gathered to listen and gossip, he offered his opinion as to the woman's possible ritual interventions and left after nightfall with no particular destination. *Where will you go?* the woman asked, expecting him to stay the night. *I don't know yet, auntie*, he answered, slinging his bag over his shoulder and walking out into the night. He left and there was much speculation as to his spiritual attributes and the possible effectiveness of his recommendations. The woman insisted he was *`anak mān punya*, a man with merit, but her neighbors were more skeptical. The significance of his obvious poverty was not unequivocally associated with the magical qualities of the ascetic and one man laughed, saying, *if he were `anak mān punya, he wouldn't be out here with us!* This term, *`anak mān punya* also describes legendary kings and monks and resonates with the intimate relationship between merit and power recounted in the Jātaka tales of the Buddha's past lives. This man was no king; his powers manifested a reputation that was rendered suspect by his association with the poor and un-powerful villagers of Sambok Dung.

The qualities of merit articulate with visible social power, but not independent of projects that attempt its disarticulation. Anne Hansen describes a tale from the *Gatilok*, written by Ukñā

Suttantapṛīṇa Ind, a Cambodian Buddhist intellectual writing at the turn of the nineteenth century, in which a young orphan from the hill regions of Cambodia is rescued by a merchant whose Buddha-like qualities speak to his store of merit and power. Through right actions and conscious attention to the Dhamma path, the boy is transformed into a Buddhist monk at the benevolent hand of the merchant.⁶ This story, written in the late nineteenth century, challenged the narratives of merit and power that naturalized the elite privilege of kings. By highlighting the value of moral transformation over social standing, this modernist text attempted to dislodge the attributes of merit from the ruling elites in an unstable political moment. The idea that careful and compassionate attention to the teachings of the Buddha result in moral transformation and social power remains, but when my friends were confronted with an individual who may have been doing just that, the idea did not quite fit their social milieu. In the story Hansen recounts, the youth becomes a monk and “remained content and happy, with the profits from offerings which arise in the *sāsana* [religion] of the Lord Buddha....”⁷ This kind of contentment was not sought after among my friends or the temple-building monks who will be discussed below.

Following the movement of merit, its boundary markings and transgressions at this historical moment suggests, in a slightly tilted fashion, the reconfiguration of the ideational and substantial qualities of merit noted by Gombrich in Theravādin Sri Lanka.⁸ Social practice was at odds with doctrinal interpretation; Gombrich notes a moment of monastic pragmatism in which,

... sensible Theravādin monks decided that food being visibly consumed by a monk could not possibly be eaten by someone else, so that, if people persisted in their habit of feeding dead relatives, the custom required reinterpretation. What the relatives were really getting was ... merit.⁹

⁶ Anne Ruth Hansen, *How to Behave: Buddhism and Modernity in Colonial Cambodia, 1860-1930* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2007), p. 168-71.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 171.

⁸ Richard Gombrich, "'Merit Transference' in Sinhalese Buddhism: A Case Study of the Interaction between Doctrine and Practice," *History of Religions* 11, no. 2 (1971), 203-219.

⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 213-14.

This slippery moment in which doctrine shifts to match practice ensures the monks a place in the food chain of offerings, and resonates with meritorious explanations and practices I encountered in Sambok Dung. In the contact zone where subsistence meets excess, merit was most strongly associated with temples, with offerings to monks, and achieving better rebirth for oneself and one's ancestors. The shift Gombrich describes alters doctrine to shift the focus of the laity away from food for the ancestors toward merit received from temple. What Hansen's story describes is an alternate attempt to shift the doctrine of merit and kamma away from the attributes of political power toward modest and personal moral transformations. The focus on temple donations and monks in the current era shifts the qualities of merit once again toward social power. Doctrinal descriptions of merit making require neither temple nor monks: in the words of the Buddha, *there are, O monks, three ways of making merit... by giving, by moral discipline, and by the development of meditation.*¹⁰

The last, the development of meditation, must be understood here not strictly as the act of sitting in silence for long periods, but rather the work of mindful engagement with one's activities and the cultivation of *presence* in the mind and thus in the world. This resonates with the orphan story mentioned above and attaches also to the purification efforts of King Asokā that gave rise to the *trāyapiṭak* of the Buddhist Pālī cannon from which the above quote comes. Steven Collins describes the “imaginaire” of textual worlds created by the Pālī *trāyapiṭak* and I suggest by the *Gatilok* cited by Hansen above as, “an unchanging ideology, which was repeatedly adopted by kings in changing

¹⁰ From the Anguttara Nikaya 8:36 IV 241-43, translated by Bodhi, *In the Buddha's Words: An Anthology of Discourses from the Pālī Canon* (Boston, Mass.: Wisdom Publications, 2005), p. 167.

circumstances.”¹¹ The use of the term *imaginaire* is important and must be understood not as something imagined or unreal, but as “a mental universe created by and within Pali texts.”¹²

The texts of empire create mental worlds by prescribing certain practices, but are also adjusted to rectify material practices as noted by Gombrich. Keyes also points to this adjustment in his treatment of merit as a tool through which imperial projects of monasticism can be made palatable for lay persons.¹³ Keyes goes on to suggest that the idea of monastic ordination, adjusted to include the transfer of merit to the young man’s parents, represents a social rupture ameliorated by the promise of merit. Hansen suggests a similar account in which the social and political instability during the writing of the *Gatilok* is re-imagined through modernity and moral development. These Buddhist purification movements retain little salience in contemporary Sambok Dung, however, where generosity is most important in the context of temple donations that in turn proliferate into powerful social and physical attachments.

In reference to the workings and machinations of social life it was not the moral qualities of merit, but its “spiritual currency” that was most valued.¹⁴ As a substance, all have access to merit. Lucian Hanks describes the way that universal access to merit softens the boundaries of social hierarchies, facilitating individual movement between various social positions, each of which exhibit personal stores of merit.¹⁵ As a substantial idea, the quality of merit confirms and naturalizes unequal social power while also manifesting the means for transforming power and

¹¹ Steven Collins, *Nirvana and Other Buddhist Felicities: Utopias of the Pali Imaginaire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), p. 87.

¹² Ibid., 41, cited in Hansen, *How to Behave: Buddhism and Modernity in Colonial Cambodia, 1860-1930*, p. 162.

¹³ Keyes, *Merit-Transference in the Kammic Theory of Popular Theravāda Buddhism*, p. 279.

¹⁴ Gombrich, “Merit Transference” in *Sinhalese Buddhism: A Case Study of the Interaction between Doctrine and Practice*, pp. 116-17.

¹⁵ Lucian M. Hanks, “Merit and Power in the Thai Social Order,” *American Anthropologist* 64, no. 6 (1962), 1247-1261.

maintaining an undercurrent of moral attributes. Hansen and Keyes both point to the problem of social instability and rupture that adhere to re-interpretations of the work of merit. This is certainly salient in the current era of Cambodia and my story is attempting to highlight the very unstable ground upon which the residents of Sambok Dung are conducting their affairs amid the moral imaginaire created through the tenants of global development as described in Chapter 2.

Rather than suggest that these reinterpretations are the result of social ruptures, as Keyes suggests is the case with ordination; or posited as an acute fiction that reimagines a morally bankrupt political reality, as Hansen suggests of the *Gatilok*; I want to suggest that the world is always unstable: the various uses to which merit is put and its constantly shifting attributes are simply tangible manifestations of the environment in which empire attempts to survive. In Sambok Dung certain manifestations of power are privileged over others and right now, social power is most highly prized, which affects the rhythms of merit as it flows into and through the village.

Merit and Patronage: Relations of domination and care

Accumulating merit in Sambok Dung is unequivocally directed toward achieving a higher rebirth through temple donation. One woman told me quite simply, *We make merit to have a better next life*. This is the most-reported reason for making temple offerings: to make merit and achieve a higher rebirth. I do not doubt that people make merit to improve their next life, but the ubiquitous uses and varied meanings of merit that I encountered were deeply implicated with contemporary goings on about town. Just beyond this statement about why ‘we’ make merit, for example, are competitive, status-oriented merit making projects in which the number of celebrants in attendance travel along village gossip chains and the amount of money raised is

written and pointed to on the temple walls. Merit-making coordinates real-time projects of power. It invites productive relationships with high officials and powerful monks that create *khsae* of connection and status: institutional effects that both facilitate and force entrance into imperial systems of gifting and extraction.

One's ability to make merit folds into acts of patronage that creates *khsae*: powerful strings of influence that connect people, temples, and the physical world. The word *khsae* translates literally as string and is used in all of the mundane ways that one may use such a word: *khsae thmeñ* is dental floss and one uses *khsae kravât* to cinch one's pants. *Khsae* also refers to relationships of power and influence and in a further usage, *khsae* bind, sanctify, and protect the boundaries of sacred buildings and the bodies of vulnerable humans. Newlyweds are bound together with *khsae`am̐poah*, strings blessed by prayer and holy water which, when tied around the wrist, can also protect funeral attendees from the caprice of the recently dead, bind one's unstable and fleeting spirit to the boundary of the skin, and attest to a recent visit to the temple. When tied around the waist and called *khsae cangkoeah* they protect one from the general threat of mayhem and illness. One can get a good job with the government because he has *khsae*; a visit to a powerful temple or monk can be facilitated by the right *khsae*; and a temple or a monk has *khsae* with powerful patrons. The string used in the ceremony to consecrate and mark the *sīmā* (boundary) of a *vihāra* is *khsae sīmā* and holds great power, but the *khsae* used to tie the buffalo to the tree has only the power of the hemp. I suggest, however, that the *khsae* that consecrates and binds the *sīmā* of the temple and the *khsae* that binds relationships of power hold similar connotations; these *khsae* neither hold in nor keep at bay, but define a boundary created through accumulated merit.

I will draw a line that was not made explicit by villagers, but one which I believe does not stray from local conceptions of *khsae* and how relationships of power between people are related to merit: *punya* (pronounced, bun). Judy Ledgerwood suggests that the reciprocal relations of giving and receiving that create *khsae* “literally bind the community together.”¹⁶ I want to complicate the notion of community just a bit here with an observation about the work of *khsae* in Sambok Dung, where despite the competitive nature of temple offerings, those who go regularly to the temple to make merit on the holy days, *twoe punya*, also attend and make offerings at one another’s private ceremonies. This *khsae* cuts across class boundaries, political boundaries, and through the divisions of economic production that structurally define the village as described in Chapter 1, but they do not include the whole community.

Merit-makers become a community and not only do people attend one another’s private merit making ceremonies, they help each other economically as well. When one merit-making, economically-challenged wife of a hard-drinking soldier opened an egg stand, conscious efforts were made by other regular temple attendees to frequent her stand; when another merit-making man needed help ploughing his field after the loss of his buffalo, members of the temple association let him use their animals without charge. These favors travel along the strings of merit and cross the constructed boundaries of social hierarchy. People who do not associate socially associate ritually and then economically, following the *khsae* created through making-merit on the holy days.

In some places and in some eras in Cambodia, the temple functions as a hub of social interaction and the organizing point for communal projects.¹⁷ In Sambok Dung, the

¹⁶ Ledgerwood, *Buddhist Practice in Rural Kandal Province, 1960 and 2003. an Essay in Honor of May M. Ebihara*, p. 159.

¹⁷ Chouléan Ang, "La Communauté Rurale Khmère Du Point De Vue Du Sacré," *Journal Asiatique* 278, no. 1-2 (1990); May Mayko Ebihara, "Svay, a Khmer Village in Cambodia" (Columbia University); Ashley Thompson,

temple is often empty of lay people and is only marginally a site of such cohesion. Although temple activity does foster connections in the community, as discussed in Chapter 2, temple building and road building projects that would have been organized by the temple association in the pre-war years were externally driven operations. The roads were funded by a World Food Program (WFP) project described in Chapter 2 and the temple building is being funded by two powerful monks: one from the provincial town of *Kompong Chhnang* and one from *Phnom Penh*. The fact of external funding in much of rural Cambodia does certain work at the community level. John Marston observed social tension in places where temples are largely funded by overseas Khmer, and more importantly notes that religious fundraising is one of the few truly communal activities in the Khmer village.¹⁸

These powerful and externally grounded strings disrupt the *idea* of the temple as the common property of ordinary people while confirming the temple as a symbol of village prosperity that facilitates access to a broader sphere of goods and services.¹⁹ In Sambok Dung their concerted efforts to raise money to build up the temple complex earned them considerably less than the cost of any construction project. In the end, monastic desires to cultivate clients and influence conspired with the *need* to bring into being in Sambok Dung what Lefebvre refers to as “appropriated space”: a space “made

"Buddhism in Cambodia: Rupture and Continuity," in *Buddhism in World Cultures: Comparative Perspectives*, ed. Stephen Berkwitz (Santa Barbara: ABC/CLIO, 2006).

¹⁸ John Marston, "Constructing Narratives of Order: Religious-Building Projects and Moral Chaos," in *At the Edge of the Forest: Essays on Cambodia, History, and Narrative in Honor of David Chandler*, ed. Anne Hansen and Judy Ledgerwood (Ithaca: Cornell Southeast Asia Program, 2008). See also, Thompson, *Buddhism in Cambodia: Rupture and Continuity*; Ashley Thompson, *Calling the Souls: A Critical Edition of the Hau Praloeung, a Khmer Ritual Text* (Cambodia: Reyum Institute of Arts & Culture, 2004).

¹⁹ Monychenda Heng, " in Search of the Dhammika Ruler," in *People of Virtue: Reconfiguring Religion, Power, and Morality in Cambodia Today*, eds. Alexandra Kent and David P. Chandler, 2008), p. 311-12.

complete” through salient symbols.²⁰ The urban monks who became associated with this temple saw a place where they could translate their own burgeoning flows of capital into substantial and foundational merit; the villagers saw in the monks a way to cultivate powerful patrons, and also a way to bring their village more into line with what a real village should be. This is not quite the technological utopia that Lefebvre describes, but is certainly part of the utopia created by founding kings, who erected temples in their conquered lands.²¹

The monk is not a king; but in this context of founding space and building temples, the king haunts the actions of the monk. Each monk has patrons whose numbers and offerings have increased since the early 2000s according to newly-made capital fortunes and the reputations of the monks: one recruits and trains young monks and in this way rebuilds the monastic tradition decimated during Pol Pot; the other is a popular monk at a large temple outside of Phnom Penh and is a gifted healer and maker of efficacious amulets. The monks make it possible for their patrons to travel to rural temples where they can make merit during the Buddhist ritual cycle and through spontaneous ceremonies to commemorate a donation or raise funds.²²

Monks and their patrons create ceremonies through which to travel and make merit, like the *punya phkā*. They also move with the rhythms of the Buddhist ritual cycle; one such important time for traveling and making merit is during the *katin*, robe offering, ceremony that takes place at the end of the rainy season retreat. The *katin* is more like a season: it lasts for about a month, during which time many robe offering ceremonies take

²⁰ Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space* (Oxford, OX, UK; Cambridge, Mass., USA: Blackwell, 1991), pp. 163-4.

²¹ Ibid., p. 6; See Chapter 3 in this thesis for a discussion of temple building kings.

²² During my stay in Sambok Dung the monk from Kampong Chhnang brought a bus-full of patrons for two separate flower ceremonies, *punya phkā*. For one, they made an offering of *dian vassā*, long-burning candles for the monk's rainy season retreat. For the other, they prepared food to offer the monks and invited local residents for the feast; everyone also gave money to support the temple.

place. Neighboring temples coordinate their celebrations to occur on different days, and lay people and monks travel near and far to attend celebrations, offering patronage that maintains old and creates new *khsae*. This season is distinctive as it is the one time of year that monks can make merit on their own behalf. Ordination into the monkhood makes very important merit, as discussed by Keyes, but all monks take the opportunity of *katin* to make more.²³

In Sambok Dung, both external monastic patrons brought their contingents of patrons to the *katin* ceremony. The lay people brought food, robes, and made donations that support the monks and the elders who care for Vatt Phnam Tā `Aū. In addition, each monk-patron made large cash donations to contribute to the building of the *vihāra* that is destined to sit atop the small hill on the temple grounds. Typically, monks are “fields of merit” and through their virtue and merit are worthy of receiving gifts that will bear fruit: “*give to the noble and the pure/ Only then does your gift flourish.*”²⁴ During the *katin*, however, they can increase their own kammic store.

All the monks I encountered during this celebration, urban and rural alike were excited about the importance of the *katin* season and their ability to *make* merit. One village grandfather bragged about the monk under whom he studied a young man saying, *with him I traveled all over the country! He was `anak mān punya and they called him from far away temples to come to their katin ceremonies.* For contemporary powerful urban monks, this traveling remains important and the *katin* is an opportunity to gain merit for themselves and their families and to increase the size of their clientele. The difference between these merit-making monks and the

²³ I need to find some textual explanation for why monks can make merit in this context, when their vows prohibit them from owning property with which to make merit through gifting.

²⁴ From the Anaguttara Nikaya 3:24 II 122-3 translated by, Bhikkhu Thanissaro, *Merit: Readings from the Pali Canon* (Tuscon, Arizona: Dhammayut Order in the United States of America, 2000).

monk in Hansen's story who was content with the meritorious profits of the temple speaks to the increased importance, and I will suggest below the increased potential, of acting the patron in contemporary society, of being a king. Temples found a space that coordinates acts of merit-making, congealing that power into the landscape and the community. Feld and Basso suggest that "as people fashion places, so, too, do they fashion themselves."²⁵ The energy of meritorious gifting and social status disperses through the physical location of the temple and can be marked on individual bodies by the number of temples visited. Monks and lay people alike travel to many distant temples to make merit during the *katin*.

Extended travel is especially common during the *katin*, but also during the *pchum biṇḍ* ceremony for the ancestors which lasts for two weeks. During *pchum biṇḍ* each night of the celebration is presided over by a member of the community who invites friends to come and make offerings, this is called a *weñ*, literally, a portion. These are competitive affairs and people brag about whose and how many *weñ* they are invited to attend, about how many people attended their *weñ*, and the money offered at each. One woman was terribly pleased with the amount of money her *weñ* raised; this prompted others in the village to tease her and insist they be invited to her next one. After the end of the two week ceremony, she took the monk aside to point to the offerings from her *weñ* where they were posted on the temple wall next to all the others. *I made more merit than all of them*, she said to the monk, and told him to make sure that all of her collected donations go to building the *vihāra*. Building a *vihāra* earns more merit than any other act; it goes beyond even ordination into the monkhood.

In a book called *ānisangs punya* (the results of merit) given to a neighboring temple by the main donors for a *vihāra* renovation, it outlines the amount of merit

²⁵ Steven Feld and Keith H. Basso, *Senses of Place* (Santa Fe, N.M.: School of American Research Press, 1996), p. 11.

achieved for each potentially meritorious act.²⁶ In this configuration, merit translates literally and immediately into a rebirth that will last a given number of eons, *kapb*, in the realm of the angels. Holding the moral precepts of Buddhism provides five *kapb*; building a *vihāra* provides thirty-four, which translates into 34,000 rebirths in the heavenly realms. “That’s a well-stored fund. It can’t be wrested away. It follows you along... you take it with you... [it] cannot be stolen by thieves. So, enlightened, you should make merit, the fund that will follow you along. This is the fund that gives all they want to beings human, divine.”²⁷

None of the Theravada Buddhists I know consider enlightenment to be an objective, rather the objective is to be, “reborn among... affluent nobles, Brahmins, or householders... provided and furnished with the five objects of sensual pleasure.”²⁸ Some people I met wanted to be reborn among the gods, but most hoped to be powerful and wealthy humans (men) in their next incarnation.²⁹ One middle-aged man lightly bantered; *I help out and make offerings at the temple because in my next life I want to be powerful, like King Hun Sen.*³⁰ This was met with scolding and scoffing by the group. Nonetheless, the slippage between rebirth in the heavenly and earthly realms is significant and while merit-making is reported to be about the next life and the heavenly realms, contemporary practice is obviously directed toward cultivating social

²⁶ This text was also noted by Keyes in northern Thailand, but was associated specifically with an ordination ceremony. The text contained a story of how an ordination resulted in the transfer of merit to the young man’s not-so-moral parents and saved them from the ravages of hell and wandering ghosts, Charles F. and E. Valentine Daniels Keyes, ed., *Karma: An Anthropological Inquiry* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983), p. 275-78.

²⁷ Translated from the Khuddakaptha 9, by Thanissaro, *Merit: Readings from the Pali Canon*, p. 25.

²⁸ Translated from the Anguttara Nikaya 8:35 IV 239-41 by, Bodhi, *In the Buddha’s Words: An Anthology of Discourses from the Pāli Canon*, p. 171.

²⁹ Generosity is considered part of the mundane or worldly path and not associated with transcendent objectives. George Bond cites Buddhaghosa on the traditional understanding of its benefits, which are wealth, good reputation, confidence, a peaceful death, and rebirth in a heavenly realm. See, George D. Bond, “Theravada Buddhism’s Two Formulations of the Dasa Sila and the Ethics of the Gradual Path,” in *Pali Buddhism*, eds. Frank J. Hoffman and Deegalle Mahinda (Richmond Surrey, TW: Curzon Press, 1996), p. 31.

³⁰ Cambodia’s prime minister has adopted the honorarium *stec* (pronounced s’daich) which is used to refer to kings and other members of the royal family. The conflation of leadership with kingship is discussed in Chapter 3.

power. To the comment by the temple goer cited above, the *ācāry* rebuffed him saying, *we can't know what kind of spell he used, but it [Hun Sen's power] didn't come from merit*. This man used the term *plī* to refer to a magic spell, which comes from the word for the *palī* language. For many in the village these two words are interchangeable, conflating magic and religion in suggestive ways that will be explored below. The reference to Hun Sen's current social power as it reflects the possible outcomes of meritorious offerings also pulls at the strings that connect the idea of merit with real-world acts of power.

People most certainly make merit at the temple for exactly the reasons they say and are engaged in accumulating stores of merit for a better rebirth. Acts of making-merit do more than accrue substantial stores, however, and the circulating energy of merit is productive beyond the temple-based offerings. The *khsae sīmā* that bounds the sacred space of temples creates a place through the meritorious offerings of the community inside of which all activities are infused with the *paramī* of the Buddha's accumulated merit. This bounded space, made by and filled with merit, makes real-world power and shows monks as players in the game of patronage and influence as they serve their patrons by providing opportunities to make offerings at the temples of the less fortunate. Temple offerings also create more ephemeral *khsae* that bind the communities of care in the village and afford opportunities for accumulating visible markers of status.

Inside the logics of merit, visible status is acquired through the lists of offerings posted on the temple walls and the personal names painted onto donated parts of the temple *vihāra*. The temple serves to proliferate merit: it is a node for local and translocal acts of caretaking that rebuild Cambodia's decimated monastic infrastructure, build up individual stores of merit for better rebirth, but most visibly it bolsters individual claims to status and social power. In the next

section I will explore the ways that temple building projects and the rebuilding of Cambodian Buddhism are also sites to further political projects, which wrap-up power and domination with strings of influence and the discourse of care.

Theoretical Interlude on founding space

Merit, I argue, is an effect of empire. An abstraction produced by the “reordering of space, time, and personhood”, quite similar to Timothy Mitchell’s description of what makes a bureaucratic system *seem* like cohesive entity that can be called ‘the state’.³¹ As an imperial effect, it illuminates the contact zones of empire and the unending rhythms of the production of space that Henri Lefebvre invokes amid alternating structures of power.³² I am not alone in thinking about temples as instrumental in founding of the place of the village: as Kun Trie, a 48-year-old mother of four told me, *It’s like we have a real village now. We have the temple and the monks and a place where we can make merit...* I want to consider Henri Lefebvre’s suggestion that the ‘ideal’ space of conjecture and the ‘real’ space of social practice “underpin and presuppose” each other.³³ That a village with a temple is somehow a *real* village echoes the illusion in Marx’s Feuerbach in which “productive forces” create spaces through “traditional activity in completely changed circumstances” and thus modify the present and reorganize the past.³⁴ That the temple in Sambok Dung is typically empty and the fact that villagers bicker over who will attend to the feeding of the monks does not detract from its capacity to realize the idea of a real village and to manifest the collective merit of villagers.

³¹ Timothy Mitchell, “Society, Economy, and the State Effect,” in *State/culture: State-Formation After the Cultural Turn*, ed. George Steinmetz (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1999), p. 91.

³² Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*; Henri Lefebvre, *Rhythmanalysis: Space, Time, and Everyday Life* (London; New York: Continuum, 2004).

³³ Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, p. 14.

³⁴ Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The German Ideology, Part I*, trans. C. J. Arthur (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1970), p. 57. See also, Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, p. 164.

Temple construction as the material production of social space is occasioned by the phenomenal work of place itself. The ground upon which the temple sits is a site that called villagers to this place for habitation. As mentioned in chapter 1, the plains at the base of the mountain are low ground and ideal for seasonal rice production, and chapter 3 discussed the powerful *paramī* of the mountain that protects the temple as well as the undomesticated forest spirits quieted by its construction. Place, as Edward Casey suggests, “is no empty substratum to which cultural predicates come to be attached; it is an already plenary presence permeated with culturally constituted institutions and practices.”³⁵ The temple, as well as the place in which it comes into being permeates the becoming of Cambodia throughout recorded human occupation.

Temple building is an event that constructs order from chaos, or so the imperial story goes: the temple founded the king’s original claim to territory and Angkor Wat was the sovereign center at the height of Cambodian territorial control of the region. During Cambodia’s middle period, temple building and the reconstruction of Buddhism after near annihilation by Vietnamese forces gave rise to elaborate dedications of reconstructed temples³⁶ and projects that connected powerful ancient temples through stupa building to a messianic cult of the Buddha Maitreya (the next and final Buddha).³⁷ During the French protectorate, the great temple Angkor Wat became a founding and enduring symbol of Cambodia as a modern nation,³⁸ and after Buddhism was again destroyed and the Khmer Rouge ousted, rebuilding temples and training new monks intertwined with national and

³⁵ Edward S. Casey, “How to Get from Space to Place in a Fairly Short Stretch of Time: Phenomenological Prolegomena,” in *Senses of Place*, eds. Steven Feld and Keith H. Basso (Santa Fe, N.M.: School of American Research Press, 1996), p. 46.

³⁶ David Chandler, “Songs at the Edge of the Forest,” in *Facing the Cambodian Past*, ed. David Chandler (Chiang Mai: Silkworm, 1978).

³⁷ Ashley Thompson, “The Future of Cambodia’s Past: A Messianic Middle-Period Cambodian Royal Cult,” in *History, Buddhism, and New Religious Movements in Cambodia*, ed. John Marston and Elizabeth Guthrie (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2004).

³⁸ Penny Edwards, *Cambodge the Cultivation of a Nation, 1860-1945* (Honolulu: University of Hawai‘i Press, 2007).

psychological reconstruction that accelerated in the post-socialist era. John Marston tells of two temple building projects connected to charismatic leaders that arose in the early 1990s; both temples make explicit connections between the charismatic power of the leader, the ancient temples of the Angkorian era, and the re-founding of cosmic order in the wake of mass destruction.³⁹

In present-day Cambodia temples and monks are important nodes in the rhythms of merit and in the re-construction of Cambodia; their presence intervenes into the flow of gifts between villagers and spirits and founds a space where villagers, monks, kings, and prime ministers can display their accumulated merit. It may not always be an abiding residence. The Temple at Grandfather Flowing Water's Mountain, Vatt Phnam Tā 'Aū, is often empty: empty of monks and empty of villagers. My concern over this was not shared by the Buddhist residents of Sambok Dung, even though a more 'typical' village temple may have monks and novices residing and grandparents and small children visiting and playing. For them the absence did not detract from the presence. Casey suggests, "Place is not; place is to be: if not entirely projectable, it is at least promised... Architecture is a making of place by the very promise of giving place".⁴⁰

Temple Building I: Vatt Phnam Tā 'Aū

Vatt Phnam Tā 'Aū, the temple at grandfather flowing water's mountain, began with just such a promise of 'giving place' as a grass hut in 2004. The new concrete buildings that currently adorn the landscape of the temple complex were later projects of benevolent merit-

³⁹ John A. Marston and Elizabeth Guthrie, *History, Buddhism, and New Religious Movements in Cambodia* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2004); Marston, *Constructing Narratives of Order: Religious-Building Projects and Moral Chaos*.

⁴⁰ Edward S. Casey, *The Fate of Place: A Philosophical History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), p. 320.

making and patronage. The temple serves four villages that straddle the provincial border and people cross political boundaries of river and stream to make merit at this place. From the grass hut built in 2004, the temple complex is now made up of one *sala chôn*, a large meeting hall for gathering and serving the monks at celebrations, built next to the grass hut in 2006; one *kuñi* (monk's quarters, pronounced kot) built in 2008; and one *pdah pây* (a large kitchen, pronounced ptea bie) built in 2009. There is no *vihāra*, which is the sacred sanctuary of the temple complex, but the stairs that lead up the small hill where it will sit were repaired in 2009 and meritorious donations flow into its futurity. This monk-sponsored temple building project was inspired by collective desires to rebuild Buddhism, individual projects to cultivate charismatic power, and by the growing Khmer population in the area and their lack of funds for concrete walls.

That a small rural temple *should* have concrete walls is an ideational imperial effect that connects the construction boom of the Sihanouk years, during which many rural towns built up their temple complexes, through the destruction and neglect of the Khmer Rouge era and to the uneven but visible prosperity of the current moment. According to the stories of village men ordained during the pre-war years, the transformation of Vatt Phnam Tā `Aū from one grass hut to its current configuration (fig.1) would have taken twenty years or more. The priorities for temple building have not changed. Temple building takes up most of the young monk's time in both the current 'post-Khmer Rouge' period of reconstruction, as noted by Satoru Kobayashi in contemporary Kompong Thom,⁴¹ and in Sihanouk's post-independence period, as reported by Sambok Dung grandfathers who spent most of their time as young novices constructing temple buildings.

⁴¹ Satoru Kobayashi, "Reconstructing Buddhist Temple Buildings: An Analysis of Village Buddhism After the Era of Turmoil " in *People of Virtue: Reconfiguring Religion, Power and Morality in Cambodia Today*, eds. Alexandra Kent and David P. Chandler (Copenhagen: NIAS press, 2008), p. 184.

Every day we would dig the earth, pour concrete, hammer and pound. We built a new kut for the monk, but only little by little whenever there was money, after a funeral or katin, then we would get materials to add something... There weren't so many machines then, we cleared and built by hand back then. It took a long time. We worked all the time, but developed the temple only little by little. In the era of that bastard Pot so much of our work was destroyed... (village grandfather, 58).

In the current era the project is tinged with trauma and nostalgia for what was lost during the era of that bastard Pot, but the importance of temples as an object of monastic and community focus has neither diminished nor increased. Part of what is so important to Buddhists about having monks and a temple in their village is that they have both a place to make merit and a place that attests to their communal merit.

Communal merit is physically present in the structure of the temple, but also in the power of the patrons who helped to build it, Marston notes that it is high praise for a monk to be considered *būkai kasāng* – a powerful builder.⁴² The two wealthy monks who financed Vatt Phnam Tā `Aū both found reasons to attach their already powerful reputations to building up this remote temple. The monk from the provincial capital of Kampong Chhnang supplied the village with its first young monk who took up residence in the grass hut in 2004. Since that time, he sent one other young monk to the village and sponsored two village boys to ordain and join him in Kampong Chhnang. The monk from Phnom Penh was called to the region by a villager who knew of his powerful reputation for healing. When he arrived and saw the temple with just the one grass hut housing two monks, one ancient and one very young, he made a donation to start construction on a meeting hall to hold large celebrations through which more funds could be raised: the *sālā cân*.

The *sālā cân* is a concrete structure and as such was beyond the technical capacity of any of the local villagers, there are two carpenters in the village able to build wood frame houses and

⁴² Marston, *Desired Ideals: Wat Preah Thammalanka and the Legend of Lok Ta Nen*, p. 187.

lay brick for smaller structures like bathrooms, but none had the expertise to build a concrete building. So the entire job was contracted by a builder from the northern market town; neither the monks nor the villagers were involved in its construction. This fact was not lamented by anyone, in fact the young monk, whom I met as a layman in 2010, commented on how nice it was to not have to work that hard! Once the *sālā cān* was constructed, they could start inviting guests over for their celebrations. The first guest invited himself, and the monk from Kampong Chhnang brought a small group of merit-makers from his temple to perform a *punya phkā*. This is what they call a ‘flower offering ceremony’ and is a non-scheduled event that happens anytime a patron wants to host a celebration to raise funds for the temple. After that, the village hosted *katin* and *pchum biṇḍ*, calling as many neighbors and big monks as they could to raise funds for their next building project.

The *kuṭi*, the monk’s residence, is a wooden structure large enough to house 5 monks, although the temple has never had more than three monks in residence. It was built using local labor and the power of the singular ancient monk, the young monk had taken a wife by that time and the old man was alone at the temple. In the intervening years between large building projects, small structures also went up. One sitting area with a red tile roof under which hung the large drum, *skor tham*, that the old monk would strike each morning and evening (while I was in the village, the young monks in residence never hit the drum). Another long shelter was built for outdoor eating at the very large celebrations. It was a rustic structure with just a concrete base and corrugated metal roof. By the time the *kuṭi* was finished in 2009 the old monk left Sambok Dung to return to his previous temple in the neighboring southern market town. There was a dispute over how to allocate temple funds to feed the monk; accusations and strong words resulted in an empty temple.

With the arrival of three new monks, sent from a large temple in Kompong Speu, the wealthy monk from Phnom Penh funded another building project and the large communal kitchen, *pdah pāy*, was completed in 2009, again using external labor. When I got there, the young monks were busy planting a garden and building an extended lavatory behind the new kitchen. New building projects continued and during my stay in the village: they raised funds for the motor and piping to run a pump from the well to the *pdah pāy*, they built long tables to go under the outdoor eating area and continued to raise funds for building the *vihāra* and for a community *ceti*. In addition to building projects, they raised money to feed the monks. During the 18 months I stayed in the village there was continual bickering over how to feed the monks. Members of the temple association admonished each other over who did and did not attend holy day services to make offerings to the monks and who was going to attend the next holy day. Finally, they decided that each member of the temple association would be responsible for food on alternating holy days, and also responsible for getting people to come to the temple with extras.

In more established village temples, there are typically a number of grandparents who spend time at the temple, visiting, gossiping, and collecting merit on the holy days. In fact, it is the old people who are expected to go to the temple, such has always been the case. Even among the grandfathers who ordained as youths, they were clear about their absence from temple affairs while they were busy raising their families and making a living. Temple life is for the old and the not yet mature, the parents of young families are too busy. In Sambok Dung, in the contemporary era, however, access to the temple and merit-making as a communal vocation for grandparents, was diminished from previous eras. Some reported this directly and others obliquely, but for all who felt the distance it was a problem of money.

Merit, Class, and Local Power

Making merit is, among other things, a class based activity and the various social classes of Sambok Dung have particular strategies for making merit. Tambiah notes that merit-making is “directed to the achievement of ends.”⁴³ Merit is a *practical idea*; it has *effect* in the world and people employ strategies of merit according to their abilities, their ends, and I suggest according to the grammar of dominant imperial forms: sometimes this means not making merit. The very poor in the village are quick to say they do not go to the temple to make merit. They tell me they have no money to make food fit for the monks, no money for gas to get to the temple, and no money to give for building projects. As already noted, however, making merit requires neither temple nor monk. One grandmother, aged 56 told me, *I am too poor to go to the temple, too poor to make merit*. I asked how she could be too poor to make merit, as I had already been told many times that when I sat in proximity of the chanting monks, whether I understood the words or not, I was making merit. It took no money or any special skills at all to make merit, one simply had to show up. To this observation, she made a derisive sound and said, *when we go to the temple, if we have no offerings to make merit, we go to eat merit, like a dog*.

When I translate this sentiment, I add the phrase ‘like a dog’. The specific form of the verb ‘to eat’ that she used is typically reserved for use with animals and occasionally with children. For this woman, social status is implicated with making merit. For her receiving merit, *eating merit* like a beggar or a monk (or an ignorant anthropologist), or of cultivating merit by minding the precepts or listening to the dhamma, is not a valorous stepping away from the world, but a degrading stepping *down* in the world: not making merit, but eating it like an animal. The

⁴³ Stanley Jeyaraja Tambiah, *Buddhism and the Spirit Cults in North-East Thailand* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970), p. 53.

value of merit for this woman, acknowledged by others in proximity while we were talking, was patronage, *making* merit, not *consuming* or receiving it. This woman's sentiment highlights her poverty, but more importantly puts forward the widely held notion that poverty excludes her from making merit. At least from making the kind of merit she wants: the kind that creates social power.

I do not suggest that merit-making as a conscious act generative of social power is in any way new or particular to the contemporary era. On the contrary, merit-making and attendance at temple celebrations are long-standing vehicles for social and political power throughout Theravādin Southeast Asia.⁴⁴ What is distinctive about this era, I suggest, is that the *idea* of merit-generated patronage, of being a patron, is at once more accessible and less required than in previous generations. Today, visible fortunes rise rapidly in the newly present capitalist system; fortunes are also quickly lost. The woman quoted above, a semi-literate laborer who came to the edge of the forest to work loading wood on the railroad, has seen her fortunes rise and fall within the past five years. In the not-so-distant past, this woman could aspire to patronage.

She arrived with her two nearly-grown sons in 1997 to load wood on the rails. She had some money from selling land in Prey Veng province and the family added their railroad earnings to that and invested in a sound system (cd player, speakers, microphone, and wiring). This was initially an excellent investment as such equipment was scarce and in high demand for local celebrations. Capital continued to flow into the region and by 2006 her special equipment became commonplace and demand fell along with her rising fortunes. Even those who have no

⁴⁴ For just a few examples in the Cambodian context, see, May Ebihara, "Interrelations between Buddhism and Social Systems in Cambodian Peasant Culture," in *Anthropological Studies in Theravada Buddhism*, eds. Manning Nash, Conference on Theravada Buddhism and University of Chicago (New Haven; Detroit: Yale University [distributor: Cellar Book Shop, 1966]; Alain Forest, "Buddhism and Reform: Imposed Reforms and Popular Aspirations," in *People of Virtue: Reconfiguring Religion, Power, and Morality in Cambodia Today*, ed. Alexandra Kent and David Chandler (Copenhagen: NIAS press, 2008); Ian Charles Harris, ed., *Buddhism, Power and Political Order* (London; New York: Routledge, 2007).

personal experience with the productive potential of the right capital investment are more attuned to material investments than merit. One young father told me, *we don't have much money to give to the monks and I need gas to get there; I need gas to work too.*

The *khsae* generated through merit making has not lost its power or its practical effects, but there seem to be other things to attend to in this era of economic intensification and one can find community among the Buddhists who do not perform merit at the local temple. The tangible effects of gas may be more imminent than those of merit and the question of imminence speaks also to the *khsae* cultivated by the political leadership in Sambok Dung. These men, the village head and the two top ranking soldiers, are not members of the temple association and do not engage in temple activities. Each gave a different jovial and somewhat dismissive response to my queries as to why they do not attend temple celebrations. The village head told me he sends his wife; this is not uncommon, but may be significant in light of his own attendance at the *loeng`anak tā* celebrations discussed in Chapter 3. One of the soldiers told me that he does not need protection from the monks, *I already have powerful khsae*, he said. And the last told me, *I don't make offerings to the monks, I make them to lok tā*. There is a distinct line that separates local administrative power connected to the government and the wealthy land owners who are all members of the temple association.

The former do not cultivate clients through merit-making activities, but rather through their capacity to arrange access land and to the means of subsistence in the market economy. The soldiers received government land concessions and laid claim to large tracts through extra-legal grabs, and can also arrange access to jobs in the wood trade, well-priced lumber for building projects, and protection from other authorities; the village head provides access to micro-finance and to the deeds and papers that solidify land claims, property sales, marriages, and migrant

labor. The large land owners wield power through their temple associations and are the leaders who solve everyday problems of the village: when someone is short on rice, they never go to the village head, but do approach the landed members of the temple association; when a bridge needs repair it is the head of the temple association who gathers the labor and the tools and makes a deal for wood with the above mentioned soldiers.

The extent to which this leadership configuration is particular to Sambok Dung is difficult to know. Thus far, very little has been written on the interplay between religious and political power in the contemporary non-urban regions of Cambodia, but my data suggests that there may be some important questions to ask about the contemporary relationships between political power, spirit power, and temple power in the exercise of local authority.⁴⁵ In a study done in three communes by Caroline Hughes, et al., they find that the resource base of a given locality effects the ways that local leaders can exercise their power.⁴⁶ Hughes, et al, found that in the commune with moderate resource availability, as in Sambok Dung, which has only timber and railroad (no minerals, surplus agricultural products, or solid roads), that the local leadership was able to control land and resource extraction with strong political backing.⁴⁷ These observations seem to fit the situation I encountered and local political elites were not compelled to cultivate the favor of local land holders and the temple they supported.

This avoidance was never confirmed by villagers, neither members of the temple association nor political elites, despite my direct questions regarding the issue. *Why is the village head not at the katin celebration?* I asked, for example. In each instance for each representative

⁴⁵ On the relationship between political and religious power, see Ibid.; Ian Harris, *Cambodian Buddhism: History and Practice* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2008).

⁴⁶ Caroline Hughes et al., "Local Leaders and Big Business in Three Communes," in *Cambodia's Economic Transformation*, eds. Caroline Hughes and Kheang Un (Copenhagen: NIAS Press, 2012).

⁴⁷ Too many resources and external corporations took over, too few resources and local political power is more closely tied to local land owners and village concerns.

of state power at each major village celebration, I received variations on the theme of: *Oh, he's very busy*. My observations are, however, suggestive of ongoing tensions between *sāsana purān*, literally, ancient religion also commonly glossed as Brahmanism, and *sāsana samāy*, reformed or modern Buddhism, and the ways that these distinctions map onto the enactment of politics.

In the early 1990s amid the socialist retreat from Cambodia, the leaders of Cambodia's ruling party staged Brahmanist rituals of kingship,⁴⁸ and rebuilt the old royal palace at Oodong, well known for its stores of *paramī*.⁴⁹ These acts position Hun Sen to lay claim to Cambodian tradition and to the power of the ancient kings. The categories of 'traditional' and 'modern' were constructed in the late nineteenth century in conversation with the incoming 'modern' political forms. Cambodian intellectuals of this era reacted to the machinations of both French and Thai programs to sever religion from governance and to perform a religion that was not associated with magic.⁵⁰ In an interesting twist, Marston suggests that attention to the ancient practices implies a reform of the purified modern practice, which was reinstated with other Cambodian 'traditions' after Pol Pot.⁵¹

In the village, I found these distinctions between *purān* and *samāy* difficult to map. In terms of temple practice, the distinction had little meaning and people told me that the only difference was that with *sāsana samāy* the *palī* chants were also chanted in Khmer. This was

⁴⁸ Judy Ledgerwood, "Ritual in 1990 Cambodian Political Theater: New Songs at the Edge of the Forest," in *At the Edge of the Forest: Essays on Cambodia, History, and Narrative in Honor of David Chandler*, ed. Hansen, Anne Ruth and Judy Ledgerwood (Ithaca: SEAP Publications, Cornell University, 2008).

⁴⁹ Satoru Kobayashi, "An Ethnographic Study on the Reconstruction of Buddhist Practice in Two Cambodian Temples: With the Special Reference to Buddhist *Samay* and *Boran*," *Southeast Asian Studies* 42, no. 4 (2005).

⁵⁰ For the ways this played out in the Cambodian context, see Hansen, *How to Behave: Buddhism and Modernity in Colonial Cambodia, 1860-1930*; Forest, *Buddhism and Reform: Imposed Reforms and Popular Aspirations*. For more on the reforms of the Thai King Mongkut (Rama IV), see Peter A. Jackson, *Buddhadāsa: Theravada Buddhism and Modernist Reform in Thailand* (Chiang Mai, Thailand: Silkworm Books, 2003); Donald K. Swearer, "The Buddhist World of Southeast Asia," State University of New York Press; Donald K. Swearer, *Buddhism in Transition*, (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1970).

⁵¹ John Marston, "Reconstructing 'Ancient' Cambodian Buddhism," *Contemporary Buddhism* 9, no. 1 (2008), 99-121.

important, because people now understood the meaning of the liturgy. There were practices that people considered *purān*, and they varied according to my interlocutor. Some equated all relations with *ʼanak tā* to be *purān*, some included family ancestors in this category, and others added the practices of healers or others with spirit teachers as part of *sāsana purān*. In a rural region of Kam̀báng Tham, Satoru Kobayashi finds tension between the ancient and modern practices in terms of temple practice and the execution of certain ceremonies.⁵² He also finds that for the average member of the temple community, in Sambok Dung this was the majority, there was little concern with the distinctions: both were Buddhism and both were vehicles for making merit. Missing from contemporary conceptions of the distinction between the ‘traditional’ and the ‘modern’ versions of Buddhism is the tension between the practice of power and the practice of morality that maps onto the distinction. I will discuss this mapping further below.

Merit-making involves the cultivation of social power. It is a practical idea that has material effects in the world. It also articulates ideational effects through which a barely educated woman with a savvy capital investment aspires to patronage, and Cambodia’s political elite aspire to kingship. In Sambok Dung the political elite also aligned themselves with the Buddhism of ancient kings and although they shunned the local temple where the *ācāry* is a well-educated man who enjoyed speaking French and attended to the modern practice, they occasionally had need of religious adepts: there were two marriage engagements and one

⁵² Kobayashi makes note of two ceremonies in particular reported from the *purān* practice that were contested among the temple community. In the first, during the *Pchum Bīṇḍ* ceremony for the ancestors, rice balls are tossed into the bushes to feed the ancestors and the hungry ghosts who may be hiding there. This was considered a *purān* practice and was discouraged by many Kobayashi, *An Ethnographic Study on the Reconstruction of Buddhist Practice in Two Cambodian Temples: With the Special Reference to Buddhist Samay and Boran*, p. 179. In Sambok Dung, they did not throw rice balls, but did prepare a special plate of rice and food that was taken outside and offered to the ancestors and the hungry ghosts. Further, Kobayashi notes a contest over the ceremony that transfers the *paramī* from an old Buddha statue to a new one, Kobayashi, *Reconstructing Buddhist Temple Buildings: An Analysis of Village Buddhism After the Era of Turmoil*, p. 188. This ceremony was not performed in Sambok Dung, so I have no corresponding data, but am interested to ask my friends what their practice was with their new Buddha statues.

wedding during my time in the village. For these events, there were no monks and the *ācāry* from the temple in the northern market town, skilled in the arts of *purān* practice, performed all the necessary rites.⁵³

Tambiah marks a strong line between dealings with spirits and the ‘ritual and material transactions’ performed at the temple.⁵⁴ This is fair, and the villagers I worked with told me the same, rather they told me that temple activities were Buddhism and everything else was Brahmanism, or *purāṇ*. When I questioned them further, however, about the how the talents of healers, traditional musicians, and creators of any kind of witchcraft or protective spells require the very merit of Buddhist observance and that chanting the dhamma in the *pālī* language is instrumental in the cultivation of such talents, they acknowledged this as a not-problematic confluence. On the particular manifestations of Cambodian Buddhism, Ashley Thompson suggests that “Buddhism... is always already an interpretation of Buddhism.”⁵⁵ That is, Buddhism depends upon the ontological category of Buddhism. It does not pre-exist any attempt to define it, but rather *becomes* what it is through such attempts. Attempting to reconcile local practice with doctrine misses the work that local interpretations, and in the case of Cambodia local resurrections, of universal doctrines tell about the deployment of the global in the service of the local.

Temple Building II: Power and Protection

⁵³ It is not customary to have monks at engagement celebrations nor are the wedding ceremonies performed with monks, but most weddings I have attended among those who can afford it do make offerings to the monks in the evening before the wedding ceremony.

⁵⁴ Tambiah, *Buddhism and the Spirit Cults in North-East Thailand*, p. 262.

⁵⁵ Thompson, *Buddhism in Cambodia: Rupture and Continuity*, p. 140.

It has been argued that those monks and religious adepts who claim powers of the ancient traditions are in league with or are being dominated by Cambodia's governing elites.⁵⁶ The situation seems to be more complicated than this; it is not the case that the ruling elite have a monopoly on the powerful ascetic practices associated with Buddhist/ Brahmanist techniques, or that all who oppose the current administration and fight for political change cultivate purified forms of Buddhism.⁵⁷ The temple-building monastic patron of Vatt Phnam Tā `Aū was quite adept and respected for his capacity to 'see beyond' the immediate physical plane and for his powerful spirit teacher who helped him heal and also infused his amulets with protective power, yet he takes a strong stance against the current administration and is a powerful advocate for democratic reforms.

It is further not the case that the line that separates the educated from the rest is a line that marks the ancient from modern practice.⁵⁸ I make this point, because the ancient powers associated with Buddhist monasticism are most certainly being cultivated by Cambodia's ruling elite, and with this rural temples are being brought under political patronage, which will be discussed further below. But, and this is an important qualifier, it should be all caps, BUT, the propitiation of `anak tã, the cultivation of powerful spirit teachers, the collecting of power

⁵⁶ Ian Charles Harris, "Entrepreneurialism and Charisma: Two Modes of Doing Business in Post-Pol Pot Cambodian Buddhism," in *Expressions of Cambodia: The Politics of Tradition, Identity, and Change*, eds. Leakthina Chan-Pech Ollier and Tim Winter (London; New York: Routledge, 2006); Penny Edwards, "The Moral Geology of the Present: Structuring Morality, Menace and Merit," in *People of Virtue: Reconfiguring Religion, Power and Morality in Cambodia Today*, eds. Alexandra Kent and David P. Chandler (Copenhagen: NIAS press, 2008).

⁵⁷ Neither Marston nor Kobayashi note the tensions I find between political and temple power in the village, suggesting this is an area for further inquiry.

⁵⁸ This is a huge investigation for which my data offers the beginning of an argument that suggests that education separates some, like the *ācāry*, but that economic activity separates others, like the wood cutting soldiers. This needs more thought.

amulets, and the patronage of powerful monks and adepts is very much a part of the lives of educated and elite Cambodians, regardless of their political affiliation.⁵⁹

This slippery boundary, and especially the scholarly notion that with education and affluence spirit practices disappear, is at once a bit of imperial debris: so-called traditional practices remain with the ebb and flow of imperial attempts at purification. It is also a bit of scholarly production of boundaries that set down in text the conundrums of state, which may or may not exist for the people being studied. Tambiah's brilliant study of spirit cults in northern Thailand is an example of this, in which the deep interpenetration of Buddhism into spirit practices was problematic only for the scholar, who was in the end forced to think beyond the theoretical paradigms he brought to his study.⁶⁰ In contemporary Cambodia, the abuses of political elites through Buddhist patronage is a richly contoured field that needs more than my study offers and more than has been discussed thus far.⁶¹

⁵⁹ This 'fact' is widely discussed in the Thai context. The Cambodian situation is different, but the non-disappearance of Buddhist (spirit) power and the fuzziness of the political, class-based, and educational boundaries between the purified and the traditional are worth further inquiry in the context of contemporary Cambodia. Some work has been done in this regard. See, Marston, *Constructing Narratives of Order: Religious-Building Projects and Moral Chaos*; John Marston, "Death, Memory and Building: The Non-Cremation of a Cambodian Monk," *Journal of South East Asian Studies* 37, no. 3 (October, 2006), 491-505, and contemporary practices surrounding the connection between ancient kings and 'anak tã spirits has also been discussed in, Chan Sophea Hang, "Stec Gamlañ and Yāy Deb," in *History, Buddhism, and New Religious Movements in Cambodia*, eds. John Marston and Elizabeth Guthrie (Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books, 2004). Elite cultivation of Buddhist power is also remarked in Cambodia's Middle Period, Thompson, *The Future of Cambodia's Past: A Messianic Middle-Period Cambodian Royal Cult*; Ashley Thompson, "The Suffering of Kings: Substitute Bodies, Healing, and Justice in Cambodia," in *History, Buddhism, and New Religious Movements in Cambodia*, ed. John Marston and Elizabeth Guthrie (Chiang Mai: Silkworm, 2004). But a study that crosses urban and rural boundaries as well as political, class, and educational affiliations would be fruitful and interesting. For discussions in Thailand, see: Justin Thomas McDaniel, *The Lovelorn Ghost and the Magical Monk: Practicing Buddhism in Modern Thailand* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011); Pattana Kitiarsa, "Magic Monks and Spirit Mediums in the Politics of Thai Popular Religion," *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies* 6, no. 2 (2005), 209-226.

⁶⁰ Tambiah, *Buddhism and the Spirit Cults in North-East Thailand*.

⁶¹ Harris, *Buddhism, Power and Political Order*; Harris, *Cambodian Buddhism: History and Practice*; Harris, *Entrepreneurialism and Charisma: Two Modes of Doing Business in Post-Pol Pot Cambodian Buddhism*; Edwards, *The Moral Geology of the Present: Structuring Morality, Menace and Merit*; Elizabeth Guthrie, "Buddhist Temples and Cambodian Politics," in *People and the 1998 National Elections in Cambodia: Their Voices, Roles and Impact on Democracy*, eds. John L. Vijghen and Caroline Hughes (Phnom Penh, Cambodia: Experts for Community Research, 2002).

I will continue here to discuss how this elite patronage manifested in temple building in the nearby market towns and present what my data adds to the discussion on political patronage of Cambodia's ancient religious practice.

Of the three temples that serve the market town to the north of Sambok Dung, two of the 1950s era *vihāra* were purposefully razed by the Khmer Rouge, and the third was used as a hospital for ranking KR cadre. Of the three, the one that was not destroyed is today the most dilapidated. I will attend here to the stories of the two rebuilt complexes. At the first, the *cau`adhikār*, the senior monk and administrative head of the temple, ordained thirty years earlier at the age of 62 as part of the first wave of ordinations after Pol Pot in 1980. He told me that the re-building of the temple started right away and progressed slowly over the years into its current manifestation. The *`ācāry*, known for his knowledge of the *purāṇ* practices, tells a different story about reconstructing the temple:

I arrived here in 1992 and started building up the temple... This temple had nothing, not even one kuṭi [house for the monk]... just a small little hut. That bastard Pot destroyed it all, all that was left was the concrete foundation from the old vihāra and the Po tree. There was no vihāra, no sālā cân... I raised money here, in the market, in the village... We didn't have just one powerful person come and give us all the money, no it was not like that. Through my own sweat and energy this way we raised the money to build the temple, I raised money in the market, in the village, and powerful people came to find me. People came for protective spells: I performed water blessings for them, blessed their cars and phones; I went when they had a baby they called me to help. Powerful people came looking for me, people trusted me and many knew me from before... I have the purāṇ religion and had been a monk for 15 years before that bastard pot. I studied the trāyapiṭak, I know the `Abhidhamma and can perform the rituals that people want.⁶² They come here to find me because I know; I awaken amulets and draw yantra [magical drawings on cloth or tattoos]. When I helped them they helped me in return; sometimes they would bring people, 10 to 20 people to make offerings at the katin. By 2002 we had built everything again.

⁶² That this man studied texts from the palī cannon and was educated with formal monastic instruction as opposed to being trained by a single older monk using palm leaf manuscripts makes his claim to the *purāṇ* tradition a distinctly contemporary definition. For a lucid discussion of the history of *sāsana samāy* and *sāsana purāṇ* see, Marston, *Reconstructing 'Ancient' Cambodian Buddhism*, 99-121.

This story of the *`ācāry* well versed in the esoteric practices of the old tradition who, according to him, almost single handedly raised the funds necessary to rebuild the entire temple complex in ten years is in contrast to the other temple destroyed during the pol pot years. This temple had no one versed in the *purān* tradition. For them the work was slow, and according to the *cau`adhikār* by 2003 they had only rebuilt the *kuṭi* and done repairs to the *sālā chān* that remained standing after the KR years. The following year they began to excavate the ground by hand to rebuild the *vihāra* and when I visited in 2012 the finishing exterior touches were being added to the *vihāra*. Over the course of 35 years they rebuilt the temple little by little, from near destruction to near completion. This was a locally produced temple and each mural painting, each piece of the *vihāra* was marked with the name of the individual donor and the cost of the production (photo 5a).⁶³ The first temple I described was notable for having no names attached to the various components of the structure, as if it were constructed by magic.

This is almost the case and the potent magic of the *`ācāry* sought after by urban elites opened a channel through which meritorious donations could flow into the temple. While these funds support the temple and temple building projects, they were not named for specific purposes and individual donors remain invisible to the general public. There is nothing new about urban elites patronizing powerful monks and *`ācāry* in the countryside; accomplished practitioners whether rural or urban have always attracted elite patronage for various reasons in particular political climates. The current climate is one in which elite patrons are looking for protective talismans and efficacious spells to bless their cars, cell phones, and business ventures.

⁶³ The temple I discuss here is next to the market, which may have influenced the capacity of the local community to pay for the buildings. Kobayashi notes the importance of a temple's proximity to the market at his field site; the wealthier temple community from the market area accelerates temple reconstruction efforts Kobayashi, *Reconstructing Buddhist Temple Buildings: An Analysis of Village Buddhism After the Era of Turmoil*, p. 179. The two temples I discuss here share similar characteristics, and the first *purān* temple that had no rebuilding in 1992 is away from the market and set off from the main road.

There is a certain haunting to this activity, however, and the capital that flows with meritorious offerings and fills the temples from which blessings and powerful amulets come remains understudied in the Cambodian context.

Monks made powerful through the capital flows of merit set themselves up as patrons of smaller temples, as I discussed with regard to the temple in Sambok Dung. Patronage founds the circulation of funds that support temples and monks; Satoru Kobayashi notes that when planning large celebrations or temple building projects, “big temples call big friends, little temples call big temples.”⁶⁴ There is nothing new in this. The speed with which new temples are erected as donations flow from powerful monks building patronage chains and from urban elites seeking magical potency seems to be new; also new is the very public cultivation of magical amulets and spirit teachers by the Prime Minister and the political elite. With such powerful patrons looking for the old magic, rural temples are cultivating magical reputations in what Marston calls, “a competition for spiritual energy.”⁶⁵

Cultivating reputations of magical prowess is not new either and has always been lucrative for monks and *acāry* who are visited from afar and are called to perform special rites and celebrations for wealthy patrons. In the current era, however, political patronage is used both explicitly and tacitly to silence monastic objections to state abuses. Sambok Dung and the market town that holds the rebuilt *vihāra* are in the middle of a large and controversial ELC, as discussed in the preface and in Chapter 1, and unlike in other areas where large-scale forest

⁶⁴ Ibid., p. 184. See also, Harris, *Cambodian Buddhism: History and Practice*; Yang Sam, *Khmer Buddhism and Politics from 1954 to 1984* (Newington, CT: Khmer Studies Institute, 1987).

⁶⁵ Marston, *Reconstructing 'Ancient' Cambodian Buddhism*, p. 104.

extraction has called Buddhist monks from their temples to protect the forest and local livelihoods,⁶⁶ in this town the monks are silent inside their beautiful new temples.

When I asked the *cau`adhikār* about the changes in people's lives in the current era, he did not discuss the problems of dispossession or plantation abuses that I heard from so many others, rather he said, *It is so much better now. The people come to make merit; they have money to donate and support the temple; they have motorcycles; there is a better life now.*⁶⁷ Penny Edwards calls these new strings of patronage, "chains of merit and menace" in which political patronage is more like a protection racket in which the "merit-worthy... display[s] of material support" depend on appropriate monastic comportment and can disappear at the least provocation.⁶⁸ The coercion and fear that Edwards describes does not quite fit the data from this temple; the old monk did not seem coerced, but rather complacent and content. The resulting comportment, however, facilitated rather than challenged the abuses of economic intensification in the region.

Beyond the menace of politically charged merit-making and temple-building, there is the fact of elite patronage of the old religion and the more magical aspects of Cambodian Buddhism. Peter Gyallay-Pap suggests that these powers represent the "core element of cosmic energy" that fuses and articulates Buddhism with everyday practice.⁶⁹ Of course, the idea of an 'ancient' religion is only salient in relation to the debris of systematization and purification that

⁶⁶ Susan M. Darlington, *The Ordination of a Tree: The Thai Buddhist Environmental Movement* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2012); Alice Beban and Courtney Work, "The Spirits are Crying: Dispossession Land and Possessing Bodies in Rural Cambodia," *Antipode* 46, no. 3 (2014), 1-18; Buddhāsāsanapaṇḍity, *Samraek Braijhoe: Dassanaḥ Braḥbuddhasāsnā Sībī Pristhān, Qatthapad Siksā Samrāp Shagamn Vatt.* (Bhnam Bēn: Buddhāsāsanapaṇḍity (The Buddhist Institute: Phnom Penh, Cambodia, 1999).

⁶⁷ The monks at this temple did not report direct political pressure, but monks I know in other regions and in the urban areas did report the purchase of their silence.

⁶⁸ Edwards, *The Moral Geology of the Present: Structuring Morality, Menace and Merit*, p. 220.

⁶⁹ Citing and comparing Mulder's 1996 work on Thailand, Peter Gyallay-Pap, "Reconstructing the Cambodian Polity: Buddhism, Kingship and the Quest for Legitimacy," in *Buddhism, Power and Political Order*, ed. Ian Charles Harris (London; New York: Routledge, 2007), p. 81.

engendered the ‘modern’ *samăy* tradition. As such, whatever there is that is actually ancient about the *purāṇ* practice is intimately implicated with the development of modernity in Cambodia.⁷⁰ That Cambodia’s political elite are currently cultivating *purāṇ* practice suggests a slight twist in the imperial logic of purification.

As discussed, there is nothing modern about the purification of religious practices; the tactic has been used by conquering states and contenders for power throughout history. Hun Sen and members of his Cambodian People’s Party are actively cultivating the potent power of Buddhist *pāramī* as it has been described in treatises on the Three Worlds and in the Jātaka tales of the Buddha’s past lives.⁷¹ This move flouts the modernist purification project still underway in which rational science trumps spirit interventions and bureaucratic salaries are valued over personal allegiances. By purposefully acting outside the prevailing logic of Western donor nations, Hun Sen performs his own purification and calls on the power of the ancient religion to maintain legitimacy and to protect his authority inside the imposed system of electoral politics.⁷²

Theoretical Interlude: Merit and Magic

Political power and legitimacy in Cambodia remain implicated with Buddhist merit and morality and temple building remains a powerful vehicle to both demonstrate and cultivate stores of merit. The act of temple building generates merit so powerful that in one story recounted by John Marston, a very wealthy man who built a beautiful temple on earth, created simultaneously an opulent temple in the celestial realm: effectively “building a bridge between the worlds” through

⁷⁰ See also Marston, *Reconstructing 'Ancient' Cambodian Buddhism*, p. 105.

⁷¹ See Hansen, *How to Behave: Buddhism and Modernity in Colonial Cambodia, 1860-1930*, pp. 18-44 for a lucid discussion of these texts and their influence in Cambodian intellectual society during the most recent wave of imperial purifications.

⁷² Oaths of allegiance to the *‘anak tā* are collected from villagers at election time, and low-ranking members of the political party are also subject to the juridical powers of the *‘anak tā* in local administration, discussed more fully in chapter 3.

which the man would travel upon his death.⁷³ In Chapter 3, I discussed the ways that the king appropriated territory from the spirit and made his claim to the space by building a temple. This founding move required the capacity to communicate with the spirit, and the power to withstand the possible repercussions from such a dangerous act.⁷⁴ These early acts of kingship in Cambodia were connected to ideas of religious merit, but always they were the explicit result of charismatic and martial prowess and the harnessing of power through ascetic practice. Unraveling the threads that wind through the vacillations of power during Cambodia's deep history is not my intention here. What I point to is the way that early imperial acts of kingship entangled the notion of religious merit and divine morality with the amoral, unpredictable, and capricious power of spirits. The merit of the king is conflated with the power of the spirit and traces of that unstable boundary of imperial logic slide uneasily over contemporary entanglements of morality with power.

In Marcel Mauss' *A General Theory of Magic*, he juxtaposes magic to religion and finds that the "idea of the sacred" runs through each.⁷⁵ Merit does similar work and seems to cross the ontological fields that distinguish ancient from modern Buddhist practice in the discourse of Cambodian villagers. Mauss' analysis is filled with dualisms about religion and magic, "religion... has a tendency toward metaphysics, magic... is concerned with understanding nature", or, "religious rites are performed openly... magical rites are carried out in secret", which I evoke neither to reproduce nor to undermine, but to complicate.⁷⁶ Mauss was acutely aware that

⁷³ Marston, *Constructing Narratives of Order: Religious-Building Projects and Moral Chaos*, p.183.

⁷⁴ See Chouléan Ang, "Le Sol Et l'Ancêtre l'Amorphe Et l'Anthropomorphe," *Journal Asiatique* 283, no. 1 (1995), 213 and Paul Mus, *India seen from the East: Indian and Indigenous Cults in Champa* (Clayton, Vic.: Centre of Southeast Asian Studies, Monash University, 1975), for a discussion of these interactions. See also, O. W. Wolters, *History, Culture, and Region in Southeast Asian Perspectives* (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 1982), for the general attributes of kingship in early Southeast Asian polities.

⁷⁵ Marcel Mauss, *A General Theory of Magic*; (London; Boston: Routledge and K. Paul, 1972), p. 10.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.* pp. 176, 29.

the dualisms he evokes do not depend on the “intrinsic qualities” of either religion or magic, nor are they solely the result of public opinion.⁷⁷ Rather, they arise from the *idea* of relative values and the *idea* of differences in potential that are suggested in the dichotomies of public and private, of moral and immoral, of traditional and modern. Mauss takes great care to flush out the ways that magic is classified as opposed to religion and magic’s close relationship with science and technology, only to come to the conclusion that the power that drives magic is collective representation. Magic, he suggests, “is the very creation of the collectivity.”⁷⁸ I suggest it is time to push Mauss’ analysis a bit further.

He makes a subtle and important point about collective thinking, which “founds our judgments and imposes a classification on things... establishing lines of influence or boundaries of isolation.”⁷⁹ Indeed, the work of classification and collective representations is at the heart of social systems, but Mauss goes on to problematically insist that the effective power of the water diviner and his wand comes solely from “the anxiety of a whole village, desperate for water.”⁸⁰ This is not to deny the very efficacious power of collective imaginings and the transformative work of thought and belief, but rather to position it in a larger relational field than the human community. The idea that the effective power of the diviner’s wand gains energy from the community desperate for water stays; this is a vital element. To this, however, we must grapple with the effective energy of the water itself, the embodied thoughts of the diviner, the physical energy created from the interaction between that body and those thoughts that meet the wand, the soil, the wind..... Not only is such a rendering more in line with ethnographic data and fits better with the explanations I have heard from my research participants, it also fits better with my own

⁷⁷ Ibid. p. 149.

⁷⁸ Ibid. p. 159.

⁷⁹ Ibid. p. 149.

⁸⁰ Ibid. p. 161.

observations, and with the observations of other ethnographers of on-the-ground phenomena.⁸¹ I bracket this critique for now, because it is not the efficacious power that I'm concerned with here, rather it is the story that founds the boundary between 'ancient' practices and 'modern' religion. Or more appropriately, the contact zone of that unstable boundary that today marks the modern appropriation of the forest with the ancient power that continues to emanate from it. Mauss never directly asks why religion might be concerned with abstractions and magic with nature, but he lays the ground upon which to ask such a question.

What Mauss glosses in his analysis, especially with regard to science, is the way that modern science and religion both also work under the same obfuscating systems of classification and belief that he clearly lays out for magic. Using Mauss' insights about systems of classification, collective representations, and the *a priori* inductions under which they operate, I will examine the work of merit as it cuts across fields of *a priori* inductions that remain as bits of imperial debris in the Cambodian landscape of collective representations. Mauss suggests that:

magic, like religion, is a game, involving 'value judgments', expressive aphorisms which attribute different qualities to different objects entering the system... which imposes a classification on things, separating some, bringing together others, establishing lines of influence or boundaries of isolation.⁸²

The contemporary uses to which the idea of merit is put among my friends in Sambok Dung illuminates the various waves of imperial power and their respective 'value judgments'. The detritus that collects along those lines of influence and boundaries of isolation are instructive, I suggest, of the ground upon which our current system of morally charged destruction rests.

⁸¹ Tim Ingold, *Being Alive: Essays on Movement, Knowledge and Description* (London; New York: Routledge, 2011); Tim Ingold, *The Perception of the Environment: Essays on Livelihood, Dwelling & Skill* (London; New York: Routledge, 2000); Philippe Descola, *Beyond Nature and Culture*, trans. Janet Lloyd (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013); Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, "Cosmologies: Perspectivism," *Hau Network of Ethnographic Theory* Masterclass Series 1 (2012), 45; Eduardo Kohn, *How Forests Think: Toward an Anthropology Beyond the Human*, 2013).

⁸² Mauss, *A General Theory of Magic*, p. 149.

The power to which merit is attached is an amoral force,⁸³ but the idea that the cultivation of merit can turn it into what Tambiah calls an “ethical force” seems to afford the idea of merit multiple manifestations that change through time and cut across collective notions of power, morality, and authority.⁸⁴ Making merit, *twoe punya*, is an “interaction between a place, a time and an expenditure of energy” that manifests a rhythm.⁸⁵ Lefebvre examines this deep interpenetration of space, energy, and time in ways that articulate the unstable boundary between modern, *samāy*, and ancient, *purāṇ*, between religion, *sāsana*, and power, *pāramī*, and between forest, *brai*, and village, *sruk*. This rhythm moves to the undulations of local knowledge, to the tides of imperial projects, and resonates with the Buddhist doctrine of dependent arising and the various capacities of merit.

The doctrine of dependent arising informs the Buddhist phenomenal universe, a place in which no thing has self-nature or self-existence. This, Ramakrishna Puligandla is careful to point out, does not mean that it does not exist or that it has no nature. The point, rather, is that the existence of anything, like a tree for example, or an idea, is dependent on other phenomenal occurrences like soil, sun, or electrical currents in the brain; “there can be no inner core, no substance, no ultimate residuum, at the heart of the tree”, or of the idea.⁸⁶ A further point I want to make with reference to dependent arising, is that arisings can be laced with intentionality: the phenomenal world is not one of purely random collisions. The Abhidhamma articulates all arisings of the present with past activities that condition the present, and with the future events of

⁸³ Benedict R. O’G Anderson, “The Idea of Power of Javanese Culture,” in *Language and Power : Exploring Political Cultures in Indonesia* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1990), pp. 17-77; Alexandra Kent, “Peace, Power and Pagodas in Present-Day Cambodia,” *Contemporary Buddhism*, 9, no. 1 (2008), pp. 77-97.

⁸⁴ Tambiah, *Buddhism and the Spirit Cults in North-East Thailand*, p. 57.

⁸⁵ Lefebvre, *Rhythmanalysis: Space, Time, and Everyday Life*, p. 15.

⁸⁶ Ramakrishna Puligandla, “What is the Status of the Doctrine of Dependent Origination?” in *Pali Buddhism*, eds. Frank J. Hoffman and Deegalle Mahinda (Richmond Surrey, TW: Curzon Press, 1996), p. 176.

birth, death, and decay; yet, within the constant iteration of the momentary world, "... it is the desire to see that tends to develop the sense of sight."⁸⁷

It is the desire to be acknowledged as a powerful merit-making patron that develops the practices of temple building or temple avoidance. Invoking Buddhist theory here deepens academic theory, and more importantly, better situates that theory into the social context of the actors in this study. Merit in this phenomenal universe of dependent arising is thus always and unproblematically embedded with other processes at hand. My incredulity at the woman who would not go to the temple to receive merit, but only to make merit, is ridiculous when I leave aside what I know about merit and attend to the phenomenal space in which it is being deployed: the substantial qualities of merit depend upon the circumstances under which the substance arises. The story founds the space in which merit is deployed, but within that space are multiple possible pathways for deploying that merit.

There is no ultimate ground, only a network of connected happenings that belie the triumphant unity of the subject.⁸⁸ This phenomenological problem of non-unity, of dependence and entanglement complicates problems of being and thwarts attempts to "state systematically" the relation between the grand tradition and village practice, as was attempted by Tambiah.⁸⁹ It also renders inadequate suggestions that spirit traditions persist because they satisfy and accommodate the vagaries of corporeal and social existence in ways that Buddhism does not⁹⁰ or the suggestion that merit transference as a non-doctrinal doctrine and practice, exists because kamic doctrines make sense only in formations that incorporate ideas of merit transference.⁹¹

⁸⁷ Maha Thera Narada, *A Manual of the Abhidhamma (Abhidhammattha Sangaha)* (www.buddhanet.net; Australia: Buddha Dharma Education Association, Inc., 1975 [1956]), pp. 329-99.

⁸⁸ Gregory Bateson, *Steps to an Ecology of Mind* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1972).

⁸⁹ Tambiah, *Buddhism and the Spirit Cults in North-East Thailand*, p. 175.

⁹⁰ Melford E. Spiro, *Burmese Supernaturalism* (Philadelphia: Institute for the Study of Human Issues, 1978).

⁹¹ Keyes, *Merit-Transference in the Kammic Theory of Popular Theravāda Buddhism*, pp. 283-4.

None of these earlier explanations or approaches to the persistence of local traditions attends to their phenomenal appearance, their situational mutability, and the ways that the imperial doctrines of the grand traditions grow out of and implicitly refer back to them. They are, as Mauss suggests, “rudimentary data”.⁹²

So far, this chapter has attended to purposeful acts of making merit: the creation and accumulation of merit. I argue that the substantial deployment of merit in the current era has characteristics that arise interdependently with the logics of universal material accumulation that characterize the contemporary global imperial formation. I move now to a discussion about having and receiving merit and the characteristics of this configuration as opposed to making merit.

People with merit: `Anak mān puṇya

Having merit founds divine kingly power, such merit is accumulated through many lifetimes by the ascetic practices of generosity, morality, and meditation that enable the harnessing of earthly power toward moral ends. *`Anak mān puṇya*, literally, a person that has merit, is a term used to refer those with such power. I have also heard the word for merit, *puṇya* exchanged with the word for moral precepts, *sil*, in the same configuration: *`anak mān sil*. This appellation marks a particular kind of power and separates the moral power of kings, monks, and healers from the amoral power of witchcraft. The power that invests witchcraft with its effective capacity is exactly the same as that of monks, healers, and kings. My friends were quite clear about that; it is not the character of the power, but the character of the practitioner that marks the difference. There are spells *mant*, sent by witches to enter *`āgam*, another person. According to my sources,

⁹² Mauss, *A General Theory of Magic*, p. 168.

these spells are spoken in pālī and are always kept secret, here Khmer villagers lend credence to Mauss' theory that magic is secret; anyone who engages in the practice of *mant`āgam*, pronounced *monagoum*, would never identify themselves or talk of their practice. Unlike the divide between the metaphysical power of the ancient religion that has effects in the momentary world and the purified power of the modern religion whose effects are directed toward a better future, witchcraft is unabashedly amoral and while not always evil, tends toward selfish ends by visiting illness or misfortune upon others; it is not bound by *punya*, but those who wield it have power.

This problem of 'witchcraft', *mant`āgam*, as the amoral side of *sāsana purāṇ* which is discussed as a sort of primitive and uneducated cousin of *sāsana samāy* is a tricky triumvirate that I am only beginning to unpack here. I will return for a little more excavation of this configuration of collective representations below. For now, I proceed to explore contemporary manifestations of charismatic and effective power that are entwined with merit and moral perfection, *punya*, *sil*, and *pāramī*, and the unstable boundary between the ascetic, the king, and the Buddha as it appeared to me at the edge of the forest and the frontier of empire.

The first time I heard the term *`anak mān punya*, related in the story above, was at the home where I lived. The man, whom I'll call *ta Jain*, was traveling through the region and the woman I lived with, *yeah Som*, called him to come to the house. He was reputed as a *grūdāy*, a fortune teller pronounced *kru teeyay*, and she wanted advice on the upcoming ceremony she was preparing. Some of Som's neighborhood friends came by to meet him and listen to his advice. The evening started with small talk about the rice harvest, the roads and local development, bank loans, and access to the forest, the usual topics. Most villagers travel into the forest to gather useful foods, medicines, and wood; discussions of their dwindling access to trees especially and

their mounting fear of ‘the Chinese companies’ and the soldiers and police that protect them were common to an evening’s visit with strangers becoming friends. Talk of the forest gave Jain an opportunity to tell of his recent meeting with a large snake while walking deep in the Aural Mountains, a story that changed the tone of the gossip.

The diminishing power of the forest is a common theme when gossip turns to stories of powerful acts. *Before... [bī mun...]*, people would say. On this evening, when talk turned to the forest Jain asked if there were tigers or big snakes in this forest. Ta Chen, whom we met on our trip into the forest in Chapter 2, spoke up immediately. Chen is considered, and considers himself, knowledgeable about the forest and he cultivates relationships with the powerful entities that reside there. *Before..., he said, there were many paramī in those mountains. Tigers, snakes this big* [illustrated by grabbing his thigh]. *The elephants are long gone, and now the tigers... I used to see tracks, but no more. There are still snakes...* and he told of the nearby snake den where none dare cut the trees. Jain was interested and asked questions of the snakes. Others joined in, telling their stories and stories they’d heard about powerful encounters in the forest. The power of the Cambodian forest may be diminishing, but the stories continue to proliferate, marking a boundary that keeps power present even if on the other side of the frontier. Then he turned to me and asked whether I had yet walked in the mountains. When I answered in the negative, he grinned and asked if I wanted to walk there with him. This was said as a kind of taunt, a dare in the context of stories invoking tigers, snakes, and magic. When I answered with an enthusiastic, *yes! I want to go!* Som interceded immediately, explaining that I couldn’t possibly go into the forest, it was way too dangerous. I exchanged a sly glance with my daring interlocutor and the old man and I went together many months later. After taunting me, Jain told us about meeting a large snake deep in the mountains.

I climbed the small rise looking for medicine that I knew grew there. When I turned my head to look for the plant, a big cobra was there, sitting on a rock ledge watching me. He was huge, this big [grabbing his thigh], and long, from here to there [about 3 meters]. I was stunned still, just looking at the snake, then I gave respect to the snake [gorab], I chanted a spell [sūtr plī] to offer respect and to let my heart be in the heart of the snake and the snake's in mine... I did not come to harm, only looking for medicine. After a moment like that, together, the snake slid off the rock and through the bush, right past the plant that I sought.

For the villagers of *Sambok Dung*, there are people who use powerful incantations, *plī*, pronounced *blay*, which can call spirits, calm wild animals, heal bodies, and make other *effects* in the world. This word, *plī*, comes from the word for the *pālī* language, pronounced *balee*, and these spells come from the *pālī* texts of the Buddhist cannon. Chanting this sacred language is understood to travel across fields closed to ordinary speech; it encounters and makes visible the often obscured interference between cyclic and linear rhythms, what Lefebvre describes as the “simultaneity of the present” that implicates presence in the movement of this sacred sound.⁹³ The *mant* used by the witch is also from the *pālī* meaning *manta*. It is different, but not in terms of the spell, only the effects, *`am̐boe*, of its entering, *`agam*, its intended target. This calls for further inquiry, because the term *mant* is also used to refer to the chants of Buddhist monks during ceremonies, but never have I heard the term *plī* used in that context.

There is a long and intimate history that connects the *pālī* language to efficacious spells written on cloth, on bodies, on money, and on paper inserted into talismans worn around the waist or neck – all considered part of the ancient religion. The most effective of these drawings, called *yānt*, pronounced *yoan*, is drawn while chanting spells, *sūtr plī*. I do not fully understand the convoluted strings that entwine these concepts to each other at the local level, and explanations shifted depending on the regional and social location of the posed question. I find the connection between the spell of the witch and the prayers of the monk to be particularly

⁹³ Lefebvre, *Rhythmanalysis: Space, Time, and Everyday Life*, p. 7,17.

interesting, and also the somewhat morphed word that refers to incantations of the ancient traditions.

The effective power of chanting sacred words is less convoluted, and while none of the lay persons I met and very few of the monks could cite the exact text from which an incantation came, the spell's efficacy was connected to the attributes and actions of the person who spoke it and also to the attributes of the Buddha gleaned from his various incarnations recounted in the *jātaka* stories of the lives of the Buddha. For instance, the spell that Jain used to speak to the snake was effective, he told me, because of the Buddha's ability to communicate with snakes and because the snake is often considered a *paramī*, which in this usage would refer to the snake as a moral and benevolent spirit, an incarnation only possible through practicing the moral precepts, *sīl*, of Buddhist doctrine, thereby gaining a sufficient store of merit, *punya*, to be reborn as a morally perfected and powerful snake spirit in the earthly plane, a *paramī*. All of my interlocutors locate *plī* in the pālī language of Buddhist texts, but also insist on their Brahmanist history and their place in the ancient religion, *sāsana purāṇ*. The seemingly magical work of healing and talking to the animals that comes into being at the moment when pālī chants meet bodies is an effect of the constant death and rebirth of the world that lies at the heart of the Dhamma.

I proceed to make a tentative suggestion about the lines of influence that may put the effective chants of monks and witches into the same lexical field, both use the word *mant*, leaving those of the non-monastic wielders of effective power to a slippery mutation of the word for the pālī language, *plī*. My interlocutors were clear about this word *plī*; I originally mistook it for pālī and was corrected. I find it in only one Khmer-English dictionary published in 1997, it does not appear in older versions of the same dictionary or any of the other dictionaries I

searched. The Headley 1997 Khmer English dictionary suggests that its origin is from Surin, a place at the crossroads of Lao, Thai, and Khmer speaking people well known for its magic and traditional ways. None of my research participants suggested a Surin origin and the word was in common use, but it does seem to be a new addition to the lexicon.

The split that severed powerful practices from ‘religion’, *sāsana*, giving rise to *sāsana samāy* and *sāsana purāṇ*, was a recent imperial effect that caused major divisions in the Cambodian monastic community during the early twentieth century.⁹⁴ The split that would have severed the moral power of the king from the amoral power of the spirit is much older and could account in some way for the lexical confluence of spells for witchcraft and chants for monks. This is speculative, but it is also suggestive in that the power of the king is deeply associated with healing and protection while the power of the witch delivers illness and misfortune. Witchcraft was a strategy by which the king maintains a monopoly on the moral use of effective power, just as purified religion relegates certain types of power to the realm of make believe and separate from the power of political authority. Typically, ‘*anak mān puṇya*’ are kings, the Buddha in his many incarnations recounted in the *jātaka* tales was often a king, an ascetic, or a mendicant monk. Among the ‘*anak mān puṇya*’ I have met or heard about in the contemporary era there are a handful of living monks, some ancient kings of legend, forest monks of the past and present, and local adepts of the forest, whom I met in person and through stories.

Among the boundaries of isolation that define the power of the king as opposed to the witch are health and morality: the king heals with morally bound spirit power and the witch sends illness using the unbound power of the capricious spirit. This is the line that haunts Mauss’ analysis and perhaps the whole civilizing project of classificatory hierarchies: the smoothing

⁹⁴ Marston, *Reconstructing 'Ancient' Cambodian Buddhism*, 99-121; Hansen, *How to Behave: Buddhism and Modernity in Colonial Cambodia, 1860-1930*.

over of the amoral power that embroils us all in the dance of life and death. At the contact zone of the more recent boundary between ancient and modern religious practice there is not such a clear demarcation. In fact, the overlap and undercurrents of *purāṇ* and *samāy* take many forms and follow multiple ‘value judgments’ taking shape in the contemporary era.

One boundary did darken, however, as I poured over my field notes: that between the *sruk* and the *brai*, the village and the forest. Anyone that I met or heard about who was adept in the arts of communing with spirits and animals, of healing, of ‘far sight’,⁹⁵ or other powerful practices involving spirits that are often glossed as *purāṇ*, claimed some connection to the forest. Sometimes, in the case of urban spirit mediums, this claim to the forest was attributed to their spirits who resided in the remote and powerful mountains of Battambang or Kampot; in the case of urban monks, this claim was made through some transformative moment in the forest or through tales of mountain pilgrimage in the country. I do not know anyone who spends all of their time in the forest, but of the lay persons I met who cultivated efficacious and powerful practices, each one of them spent time deep in the forest; some carried powerful objects gathered there, but all carried stories that dance along both sides of the line that marks Buddhist from Brahmanist, the ancient from the modern religion, and the forest from the village.

Thompson suggests that the temple mediates the space between the *sruk* and the *brai*.⁹⁶ This is very suggestive, but I might take it further and say that Buddhism rather than, or with the help of the temple, mediates that space. One could go even further and say that it is king, religion, and temple that draw power and legitimacy from the contact zone between the village and the forest in many cross-cultural contexts. Penny Edwards traces the physical and conceptual forest across both European and Khmer imaginaries and suggests that the “forest has its own

⁹⁵ In Khmer people said ‘*angguoy moel chngāy*’ to sit and see far.

⁹⁶ Thompson, *Buddhism in Cambodia: Rupture and Continuity*, p. 150-55.

cosmology” as a place of “transition and transit”.⁹⁷ The similarities between Khmer and European stories of the contact zone of the forest are striking; both position the forest as a place of resistance from tyranny or as a royal sanctuary where justice can be found, both also tell stories of transgression, where children are abandoned and grandmothers are eaten by their grandsons. Further research will present the stories of state-assimilated people in productive juxtaposition to stories from non-state people, who live in the forest along with other sentient individuals, like powerful spirits and powerful predators that can deliver death, illness, and misfortune through encounter.⁹⁸

The founding space of the temple intercedes into the powerful relationships of the forest and into the power of the spirit who delivers both illness and healing in a system of justice and reciprocal care. The temple delivers only healing and never illness and it encourages field over forest cultivation; it marks the forest as a place apart from the field even as the *sīmā*, the sacred boundary of the temple, manages the fluid boundary across which many entities travel; human and non-human, malevolent and benign.

Conclusion

The Cambodian Buddhist temple represents the moral power of religion that binds the wild and imaginative potential of the forest. With shade trees, statues of animals, ponds and

⁹⁷ Penny Edwards, "Between a Song and a *Prei*: Tracking Cambodian History and Cosmology through the Forest," in *At the Edge of the Forest: Essays on Cambodia, History, and Narrative in Honor of David Chandler*, ed. Anne Hansen and Judy Ledgerwood (Ithaca: Cornell Southeast Asia Program, 2008), p. 138.

⁹⁸ McCann notes that in Cambodia, spirits can be bargained with, but are better avoided. Greg McCann, "Bioregions and Spirit Places: Taking Up Jim Dodge's Long Lost Suggestion," *The Trumpeter* 27, no. 3 (2011), p. 12. Kohn highlights the ways that as humans in the forest we see, and are seen by, all its inhabitants; we enter into relationships defined mutually by symbolic representations. Kohn, *How Forests Think: Toward an Anthropology Beyond the Human*. In personal communications with Magnus Fiskesjö, he suggests that among the Wa people living in the highlands between Southern China, Burma, Thailand, and Laos, there is no mutual representation with spirits, which are only entities to be carefully avoided.

pastoral pathways, the temple “stands always as an invitation to the forest”.⁹⁹ This image of the temple inviting one into the forest reminds me of all the invitations I received to travel in the forest with those who go there; it is a taunt and a dare, but I think it is also a way of confronting the conceptual boundary erected by the ‘value judgments’ that separate me, the white anthropologist, from them, the Cambodian villager and forest adept. Further, and more importantly this conceptual boundary separates them from ordinary villagers like Som, who had no intention of going to the forest, who held the five Buddhist precepts of the layman, and who engaged in competitive merit-making with her neighbors. Between the *sruk* and the *brai* is both a physical and a conceptual boundary dotted with the discourses of empires past and present.

Erik Davis suggests that “field [*srok*] and forest [*prie*] are ideological pure types” that reflect a “decision” about how to “divide land and life into symbolic dualism.”¹⁰⁰ This division gives rise, he suggests, to “a geography of desire” in which the people get “caught between the forest and the elites”.¹⁰¹ I suggest, following Davis’ idea of a ‘geography of desire’ that the deployment of merit crosses and blurs the pure types of ideology, rubbing against and sticking to the spaces between the forest and the village, between morality and power, and through such contact it comes to represent desire. The monk’s desire to be more than a *field* of merit enacted through *katin* patronage and temple building; the villager’s desire to be a patron and not a recipient of merit, like the beggar (or the monk) who eats the merit of others; the desire of the ruling elite to present and align with magical power; and the desire of villagers for advice, healing, and protection in an always unstable world.

⁹⁹ Thompson, *Buddhism in Cambodia: Rupture and Continuity*, p. 150.

¹⁰⁰ Erik W. Davis, “Between Forests and Families: A Remembered Past Life,” in *People of Virtue: Reconfiguring Religion, Power and Morality in Cambodia Today*, eds. Alexandra Kent and David P. Chandler (Copenhagen: NIAS press, 2008), p. 132.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, p. 133.

Temples mark a place of promise that both signify and magnify the instability of the momentary world, an instability that can be projected into a future of imagined solidity. In the quote that opens this chapter, Thompson makes a number of important points about temples that are worth quoting at length:

...the wat can be thought of as the expression of a sort of collective ideal, built, maintained, and operated by all for the benefit even—or especially—of those who are otherwise marginal to society. Of course, we should remember that the ideal remains by definition more or less unobtainable. The trickle-down theory of wealth redistribution... has often seemed a cruel joke in the modern era... When, for example, local monetary contributions are so massively dwarfed by those of outsiders, traditional local responsibility for defining and implementing communal goals can be supplanted, such that ‘renewal’ projects appear to fulfill personal political goals oriented around self-gratification, with relatively little practical benefit to local development...

These constantly shifting borders between the inside and the outside of community are of particular importance... it is precisely as the locus of culture that the wat incorporates representation of the uncultured—that is, of the outside-of-society... The wat harbors outcasts within: those who are not fully integrated into the society [like spirits]. Their position inside is in a certain sense as an outsider... [This] flies in the face of the Western Enlightenment tradition of linear logic and the ultimate goal of the resolution of contradiction... circularity is celebrated [here] and contradiction is set forth in the absence of a dialectical move toward synthetic resolution... this embrace of the possibility of the coexistence of two apparently opposing forces free of any pressure, theoretical or otherwise, to ultimately establish a hierarchy of one over the other... [is] the ‘noncontradiction’ of apparently opposed terms: the modern and the traditional, the concrete and the abstract, the universal and the local... and so on.

The project of solidifying the future, of smoothing over the contradictions and uncertainties of existence toward synthetic resolution is not, I suggest limited to the Enlightened imagination, but rather moves to rhythms of power and hierarchy that embed, but always exceed the ‘imaginaries’ of empires. It adheres to temple-based merit-making amid contradictions that produced excess in the building up of Vatt Phnaṃ Tā `Aū. The temple exceeds the needs of the community and is more than they can support, but it is desired nonetheless. The temple enacts their collective merit and provides a field where their meritorious offerings can increase their social status in this life

and the next. It also provides a vehicle for monks to increase their store of merit, their collection of clients, and to contribute to the country-wide enactment of rebuilding Buddhism in a modern image, with concrete temples and large spaces for fund-raising ceremonies through which future buildings will emerge.

Entangled with that future emergence is the present of the diminishing forest and the powerful spirits and potential that forest once held. Contemporary enactments of merit resonate with the promises of an ‘imaginary’ created in the stories and texts of imperial projects from the Pāli Canon of King Asoka to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights of the United Nations. Imbedded in these promises of future stability is an entanglement of morality with power that remains connected to the structures of Buddhism as a religion of state, and influence how Cambodian political elites represent their claims to authority. At the level of state power, these representations involve explicit engagements with the capricious power of spirits and with the production and renovation of temples that represent its transformation into moral power.

The temple is a liminal space, as Thompson suggests, but I want to attend to that liminality as part of the interstitial zone where the power of empire meets the power of the forest. The excess from the incommensurability of that encounter is partially visible in the deployment of power through merit. Moral power is the desire represented by merit. It exists in the legends, temples, and robes of empire. It is desired, but not really expected in the daily lives of the Khmer Buddhists I know: the king does not govern, but *eats* the kingdom and there is no real distinction between prime minister and king. Further, the merit that gives rise to the king is slightly different than the merit that gives rise to powerful monks and healers. For my interlocutors, the latter is a bit slippery and difficult to pin down; it has an edge to it that merit cannot fully contain. It

escapes and transcends village social hierarchies through contact with the forest and coordinates effective power that is at once feared and admired.

While the temple and the monks are important nodes in the rhythms of merit, merit practices and those who cultivate merit undulate through projects of governance and resource domination and through the wild and ungoverned power beyond the human. Merit moves through spiritual and social practices in the village, it creates *khsae* that bind people in relationships of both inclusion and exclusion, and complicates the local ontological categories of *sāsana samāy*, and *sāsana purāṇ*. In its boundary crossing capacity, merit also proves to be a force that coordinates multiple motivations; allowing them to be spoken all in one breath, here in this chapter.

Conclusion

Dwelling

The pages of this volume dwell among the contact zones and boundaries that define the landscape today called Sambok Dung. The place is organized by the “determination of frontiers”, but the story that emerged was of their ephemeral nature; every frontier is a contact zone and as de Certeau suggests, the boundaries are marked only by what crosses them.¹

Sambok Dung is a contact zone where multiple ways of being in the world are simultaneously at play. The forest is becoming village and the trees are at once spirit places, local resources, and transnational commodities; the roads come and go, hardening with bursts of capital investment, then dispersing with seasonal rains and the heavy trucks of industry; places of worship have transformed from thatch huts into bright concrete structures embedded in national and transnational flows of capital, influence, and care; and the portioning and privatizing of land had just begun in earnest at the end of my stay.

People came to this place following the promise of subsistence through both the wood trade and land ownership. Once here, they began enacting the fractured mosaic of localized customs and experiences that tell of social reconstruction, of debilitating memories, and of vibrant spirit practices.² The variety of local experiences that emerged through my conversations with people in their homes, at the market, at village meetings, and celebrations, confirms only the need for continued discussions of village life and of rural social systems in contemporary

¹ Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), p. 127.

² Judy Ledgerwood, *Cambodia Emerges from the Past: Eight Essays* (DeKalb, IL: Southeast Asia Publications, Center for Southeast Asian Studies, Northern Illinois University, 2002); Eve Monique Zucker, "Transcending Time and Terror: The Re-Emergence of Bon Dalien After Pol Pot and Thirty Years of Civil War," *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 37, no. 3 (2006).

Cambodia.³ There are however, salient zones of articulation and delimitation that offer glimpses into the various forces that influence the structures of local frontiers and articulate people to nodes of power that govern life and livelihood. I have tried to attend to power in its multiple guises in these pages and to point out the ways it is encountered and embroiled through intentional acts of subsistence.

Agency works both ways in these relationships of unequal power and the individual reaches out to the spirit as much as the spirit interpolates individuals and communities. One could suggest that the problem of subsistence informs both agents in this drama. I have also taken pains to point out that the spirit-owner of the water and the land is not the only node of power from which people seek access to resources; in equal measure neither is the market-oriented, human-rights wielding system of organized subjection currently moving in to lay claim and control access to resources. I have attempted here to describe the physical and cognitive landscapes that emerged at the intersections of this dance of power.

Subsistence and Structure

In the contact zone of Sambok Dung subsistence comes from many places. The village is both sruk and brai and people gather and inhabit their dwellings according to how they engage with each. Early inhabitants tell of the time when the place was “*nothing but forest*” [suddhatāe brai], and the distinction between the sruk and the brai continues to define the traversable world for many. There are those who do not go to the forest and those who farm no rice. These definitional boundaries inscribe themselves into the land and structure the configuration of

³ John A. Marston, *Anthropology and Community in Cambodia: Reflections of the Work of May Ebihara* (Caulfield East, Vic.: Monash University Press, 2011).

homes, yards, neighborhoods, and routes of transaction, as if confirming Marx's suggestion that "production 'makes' the social..."⁴

Modes of subsistence give rise to modes of production and together influence the production of the space in which subsistence takes place. This is not to say, however, that the small intentional acts of dwelling, building, and providing for families is the only force that shapes the space in Sambok Dung. Construction, Lefebvre reminds us, is a function of "social relations and techniques that influence the rhythm and the order of space."⁵ The neighborhoods and dwellings that so clearly demarcated modes of subsistence upon the built environment were also products of the minds that built them; what is deemed proper and necessary for a given set of practices underpins and presupposes the space of social practice.⁶ Social practice in contemporary Sambok Dung and the ideal spaces in which it 'should be' carried out involve more than basic subsistence and embed global projects of extraction and consumption.

There is also a productive tension that arises with the active role of space in existing modes of production: walking makes a trail, which makes a river when it rains. The zones of accommodation that emerge with the movements of bodies and energies in space also become zones of history and of domination: "space serves and hegemony makes use of it."⁷

That hegemonic space is conditioned and codified, however, in a landscape that is never still; it mixes and mingles through the "binding of medium and substance"⁸ Tim Ingold suggests that the ground is an interface between the mental and the material where, "the sheer physicality

⁴ Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The German Ideology, Part I*, trans. C. J. Arthur (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1970), p. 50.

⁵ Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space* (Oxford, OX, UK; Cambridge, Mass., USA: Blackwell, 1991), p. 159.

⁶ Ibid., p. 14, 162.

⁷ Ibid., pp. 11.

⁸ Tim Ingold, "Footprints through the Weather-World: Walking, Breathing, Knowing," *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 16 (2010), p. S33.

of the world comes hard up against the creativity of human endeavor”.⁹ It is in this contact zone, between the human endeavor and the ‘sheer physicality’ of the physical environment where the frailties of the development project are most visible.

Stories and Empire

Michel de Certeau suggests that stories organize places of habitation. They describe displacements and outline the contours of the inhabited world by use of “proliferating metaphors” that bring place into mind.¹⁰ When people first arrived in Sambok the place was “*nothing but forest*” [suddhatāe brai]. This phrase was also used to describe the part of the village beyond the railroad tracks, marking the contour of the knowable and desirable world. The knowable world is one where concrete houses of worship found the space of the village as ‘real’. *It’s like a real village now...* the young woman said of Sambok Dung once it had a temple.

Marx and Engels brought to our attention the powerful forces of production and embodied practices at work in the production of space. Both outside and inside of the modes of comportment and production is the subtle rhythm of history, which influences daily activities to make them seem like the goal and the objective of the histories we recount. This ‘march of history’ appeared to me, in the early 21st century at the margin of empire, less like a progression from point A to B, as a march might be, and more like an ebb and a flow. This was not linear, but cyclic, empire is a tidal flow. What was visible in both the physical and cognitive landscapes of Sambok Dung were multiple tides of imperial power that washed over the land called Cambodia and carried along all the tools for making history: education, markets, and strings of global influence and care.

⁹ Ibid., p. S124.

¹⁰ de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, p. 116.

When imperial power wanes, so it seems does history. The view from the edge of the forest made clear that we are not at the apex of an evolution of human society impelled by increasingly sophisticated and powerful technologies. Rather, human habitation and dwelling are going on along, morphing and adapting to the various constraints and influences of power that effect access to the resources necessary to go along. Each wave of external and extractive power leaves its mark on the people, their practices, and the spaces they construct. Sambok Dung becomes a real village only when it erects a Buddhist temple, regardless of the debilitating excess of that endeavor.

The contradictions of the event of temple construction and the displacements that it entails are embedded in the ‘proliferating metaphor’ of merit. It takes merit to build a temple and building it makes merit as well. Temple offerings and opulent constructions feed the monks and by extension feed the projects of extraction enacted by imperial power; but remaining underneath, going on before, in between, and probably after empire, is the merit that gives power to those who talk to animals and plants, who heal the sick attend to the ceremonies that feed the spirits.

The stories of empires past and present embed the landscape in the legends of spirits turned into mountains and of benevolent kings upon whose mountains the displaced can take refuge. The diasporic communities of the Cham fled from one extractive empire and landed in another, but not before they adopted the practices of yet another imperial form that connected them to even wider networks of subsistence and care. In the contemporary moment, the rising tide of empire is describing the boundaries inside of which access to resources take place and upon which people constitute relations of protection and care in their own community.

I present these bits of physical and ideational construction as remnants of a great number of externally driven projects of extraction and domination. The debris of empire. I follow Ann Stoler's gaze toward this debris, but broaden her account so as to re-member the breadth of empire and to include the debris from other times and nodes of power. Taking this longer view of the debris left behind on the shores that empire visits while attending to the lives of people engaging the acts of the everyday, the means and modes that go on with or without empire, pulled the stories of kings into the landscape in ways that go beyond their cooptation of mountains.

Spirits and Power

The mobile landscapes of power that my story explores present interstitial boundary zones: messy, improvisational zones of contact that attend to the bridges and the fuzzy regions at the boundaries of various ways of being in the world. By attending to the spaces in-between the stories that people tell about who they are and what they are doing, the stories that tell how one should be and the proper ways of practice, I conflate what is currently discussed as religion, politics, and nature.

At the nexus of this conflation of power sits the spirit owner of the land, whose juropolitical place in the lives of subsistence farmers and those who cultivate power beyond the tenants of appropriation and domination, gathers together the social forms that contemporary powers have cast asunder. Numerous imperial projects have traversed this region and the legitimizing truths taught by each remain in physical and cognitive landscapes while local beliefs, values, and practices continue through the ebbs and flows of power. The suggestion that traditional culture is subsumed by state projects is untenable in this context, as is the carefully

constructed ontology, or world view, of the current empire that posits nature as an inert resource. Monsoon rains reclaim the expensive roads of commerce each season and local subsistence and patterns of worship continue along paths that endure through the wreckage.

The ‘proliferating metaphor’ of *pāramī* traces the interstitial boundary between the religion that legitimized earlier empires and the spirits whose power they appropriated. *Pāramī* has transformed from its original attribute of perfection to describe power: power that adheres to spirits, to places, and to people that can draw that productive power into intentional use. This is not the power of domination, but attaches rather to the power of care and of submission. Peter Jackson suggests that “subjection must be placed on a par with agency as a human coping strategy” and my research suggests that it is subjection to the power of the spirit that informs the ways of being in the world that will continue without the state.¹¹ The social fiction of Religion, not as something untrue, but as something fashioned and purposefully created,¹² I argue does not apply to spirit traditions and that the spirit the radically ‘other’ to what religion, as a social category, is supposed to be.

Robert Orsi calls attention to the difficulties of studying religion and to the multiple manifestations of activities that fall under the categorical heading of Religion, from community healing and support to the sexual exploitation of young boys by trusted elders. This, he suggests, is a quality of “the religious imagination that blurs distinctions, obliterates boundaries—especially the boundaries we have so long and so carefully erected...”¹³ It is to this blurring of boundaries that I attend in my treatment of religion and empire, in my treatment of religion and

¹¹ Jackson, Michael, *Lifeworlds: Essays in Existential Anthropology* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2013), p. 29.

¹² Clifford Geertz, “The Impact of the Concept of Culture on the Concept of Man,” in *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays* (New York: Basic Books, 1973).

¹³ Robert A. Orsi, *Between Heaven and Earth: The Religious Worlds People make and the Scholars Who Study them* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2005), p. 191.

spirit, and in my attention to the historical and material traces that inform the boundaries of these social fictions. The spirit of the land, I suggest is the other to all these historical and material traces.

The idea of surrender and of acceptance was very powerful among my friends in Sambok Dung. The road washes away, but the work of daily life continues amid the contours of the relationships between domination and care. The spirit is always present regardless of the presence of Buddhism or the state. Mine is an un-modern project that attends not to the carnage of genocide or to the promise and destruction of economic extraction, but to the persistence of subsistence and the future-oriented strategies it entails.

Frontiers and Bridges

These chapters grapple with the entanglement of subsistence strategies and religious practices that radiate into national and international development projects of care and exploitation.

Through the stories I have told here, of contact, frontier, and connection, I present the political and the religious as coexisting modes of power, each with particular agendas for making subjects. I argue that the power of each grows out of basic subsistence activities and is quite literally grounded in the productive capacity of the earth—in the environment.

To classify organizations that wield social power as religious or political is to invoke social fictions. Religion and politics are modes of exercising social power and their separation as distinct social entities is a historical phenomenon. So too is the conflation of religion with other kinds of worship that involve non-human entities a fiction; fashioned, I suggest, toward the particular end of maintaining the notion that politics and religion are distinct social forms. In Southeast Asia, the spirits of the land are powerful entities embroiled equally with politics and

religion; the earliest Khmer kings purchased land directly from the spirits and erected temples where priests would collect the offerings for both the spirit and the king.

The use of categorical terms is always problematic and all social scientists understand the ‘fictional’ nature of such terms. The intervention into the categories of social science is not the focus of my project, but is an unavoidable outcropping of looking at the in-between places where the category meets the ground. And further, where the ground meets again the production of knowledge where the category is again deployed. I suffer a distinct terminological constraint when I use the term ‘religious practices’ to refer to people’s engagements with spirits embroiled with the earth’s natural processes.

There is an intimate violence of life in which we eat and are eaten; this is a violence that the stories of empire attempt to smooth over with classificatory logic. The ‘other’ is suggestively born in the act of classification and seems to aggressively haunt all attempts to smooth over the contact zone of classificatory boundaries. Orsi suggests that there is a "compulsive attraction of otherness-- not of difference that can be bridged but otherness that cannot and that offers only the alternatives of surrender or repulsion."¹⁴ I do not know if there is a way beyond the ‘othering’ that retains and grapples with the very real work of classification.

The roads of economic development come and go, hardening with bursts of capital investment, then dangerously dispersing with seasonal rains and the heavy trucks of industry. In contrast, the trails of subsistence and daily life carved by foot, motorbike, and oxcart persist; they shift and accommodate the high water and fallen trees, and they appear again through the wreckage of washed out roads. The complementary roles of surrender and domination embed what we classify as road and trail respectively. Both modes of travel require constant care; they

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 182.

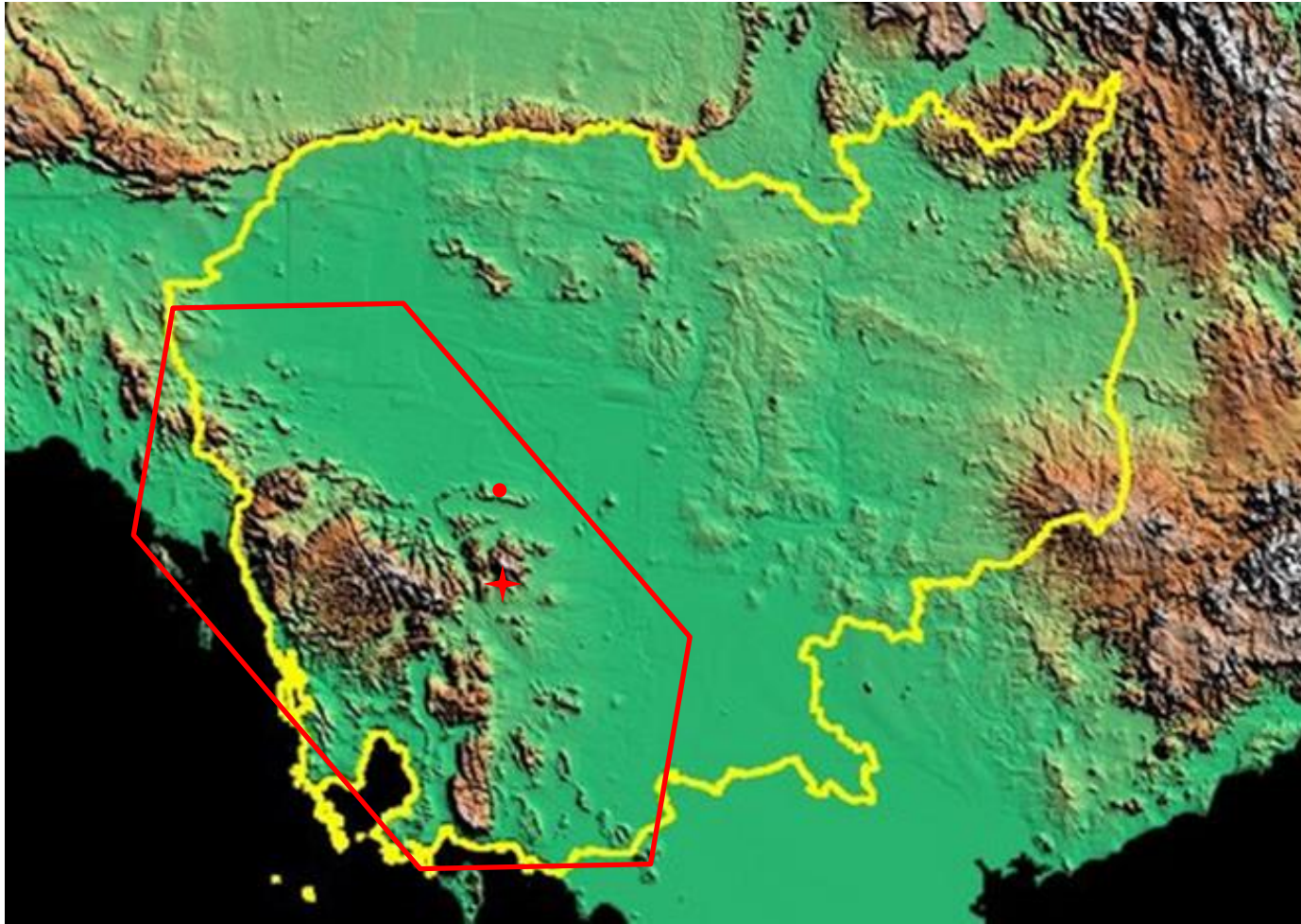
define people's encounters with the forces of nature and the forces of state, and feature strongly in acts of community and sociality.

The land gathers. People collected and settled in the low fields at the base of *Phnam Tā`Aū*, where the water flows and remains through the season. The spirit gathers. Entering into dreams the spirit calls people to come to the powerful places; they are asked to dance, feast, and play music enacting the cycle of birth and death giving their energy back to the spirit and to the land. Capital also gathers and the railroad tracks draw people to the routes of extraction and commerce, taking the trees and using them to feed the markets from which subsistence also comes. Buddhism and Islam gather as well and connect people to relationships of domination and care that articulate boundaries around stories of the way the world is and how one should behave.

For Heidegger, the bridge gathers together two sides of the chasm, founding a place where there was none before. de Certeau suggests that the story marks the boundary, in some ways forging the divide and making each side distinct. The Other becomes along this divide, over there. The bridge then is a small pathway over which one may venture. But, we travel to the other side only to discover that there is no Other opposed to what is here; everything here is always and already over there. The spirit is Nature, not religion. That Nature becomes spirit is, I suggest just as Mauss says, a collective representation. A fiction. Fashioned according to use, but not make believe. Made perhaps so as to believe, but produced from matter. My data complicates the agentive directionality of that fashioning, the spirit interpolates villagers. It may be time to question the suggestion that the human animal is the driving agent. It may be that the human animal is only telling stories: describing boundaries that haunt us from the other side.

The spirit is not religion, and its continued and continuing presence haunts the stories of transcendent gods and otherworldly realms. Religion takes on community and care-taking responsibilities, but as my stories describe, it works in many ways like political projects. It may be that 'religion' founds a divide, through stories, between the power of Nature and political projects of material accumulation.

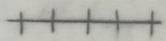
Map 1





Phnom Aural




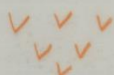
Phnom Kuk


RailROAD = 


Cart Path = 


TRAIL = 

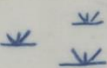
Mosque = 

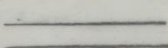
PLANTATION
MANGO = 

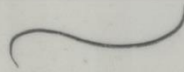
Kitchen GARDEN = 


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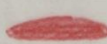
CLEARED
unplanted = 

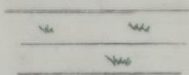
MARSH = 

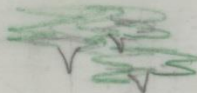
Main Road = 
Raised dirt

Raised dirt
Road = 

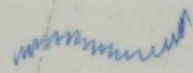
TEMPLE = 

Neak
Ta = 

RICE = 

TREES = 

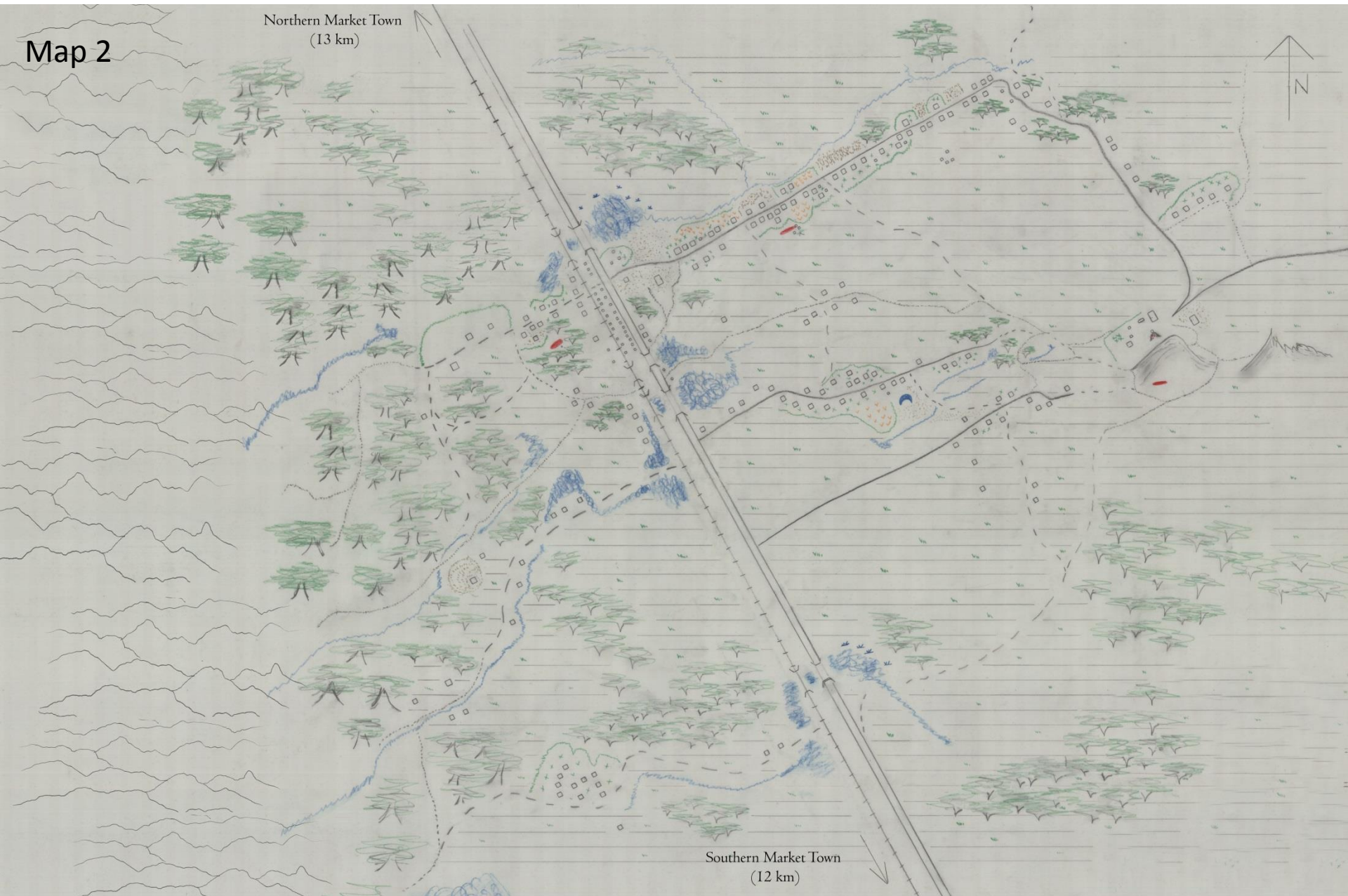
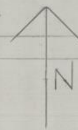
FOREST = 

WATER = 

Map 2

Northern Market Town
(13 km)

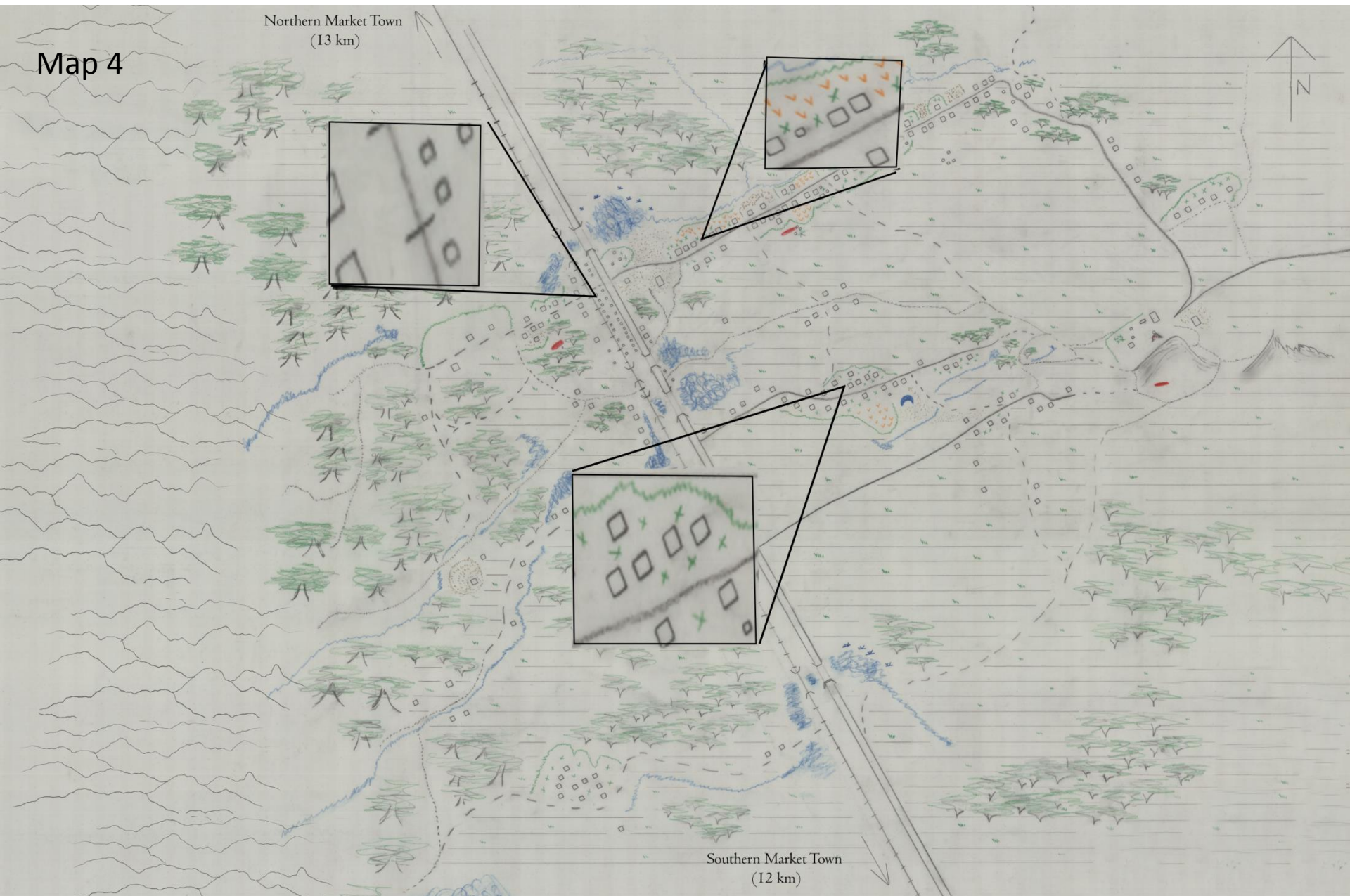
Southern Market Town
(12 km)



Map 3



Map 4



Map 5

Northern Market Town
(13 km)

Southern Market Town
(12 km)

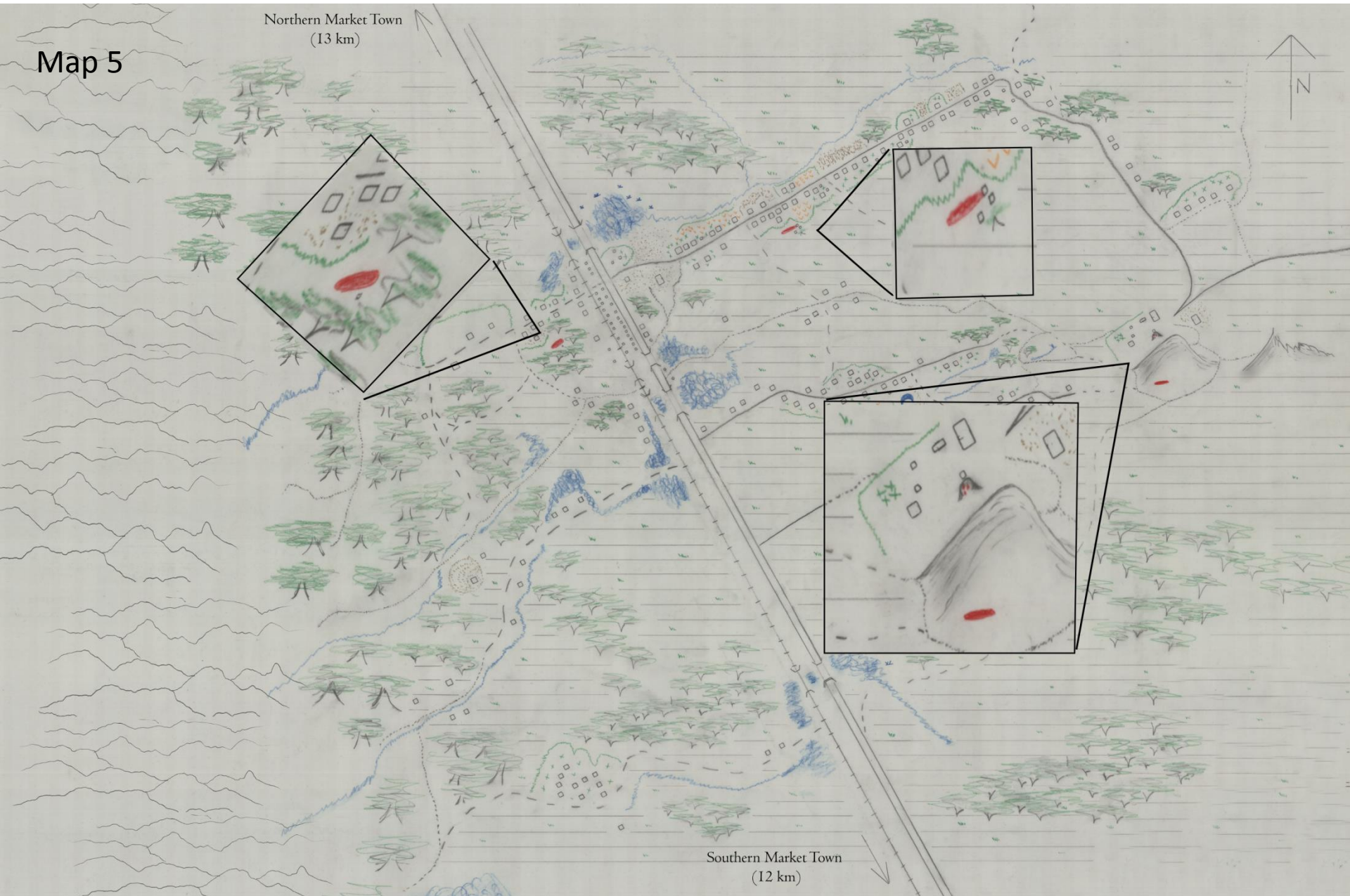
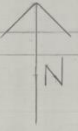


Photo 1a



Photo 1b



Photo 3a



Photo 3b



Photo 3c



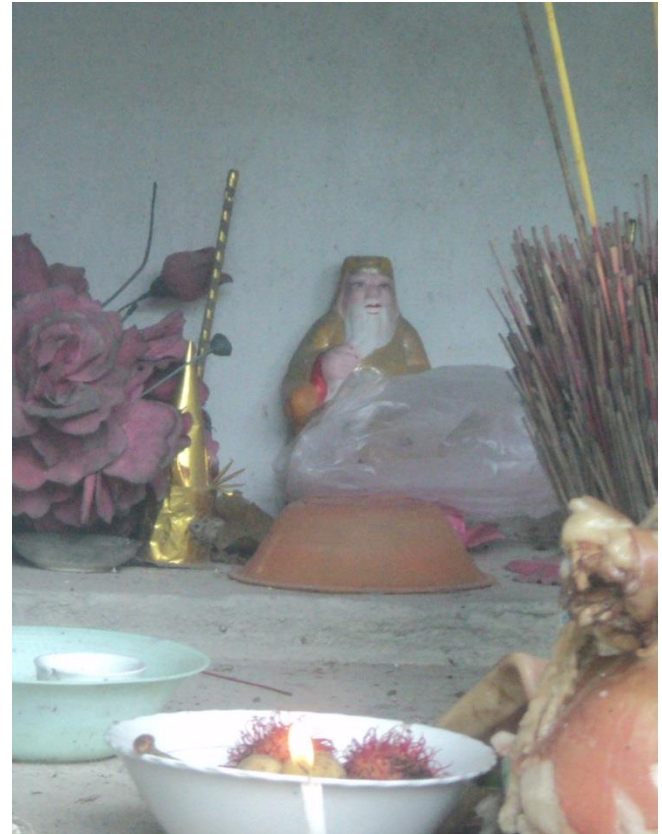
Photo 3d



Photo 3e



Tā Gum Yāy Dā



Lok Tā Býng Kaṇṇáp

Map 5

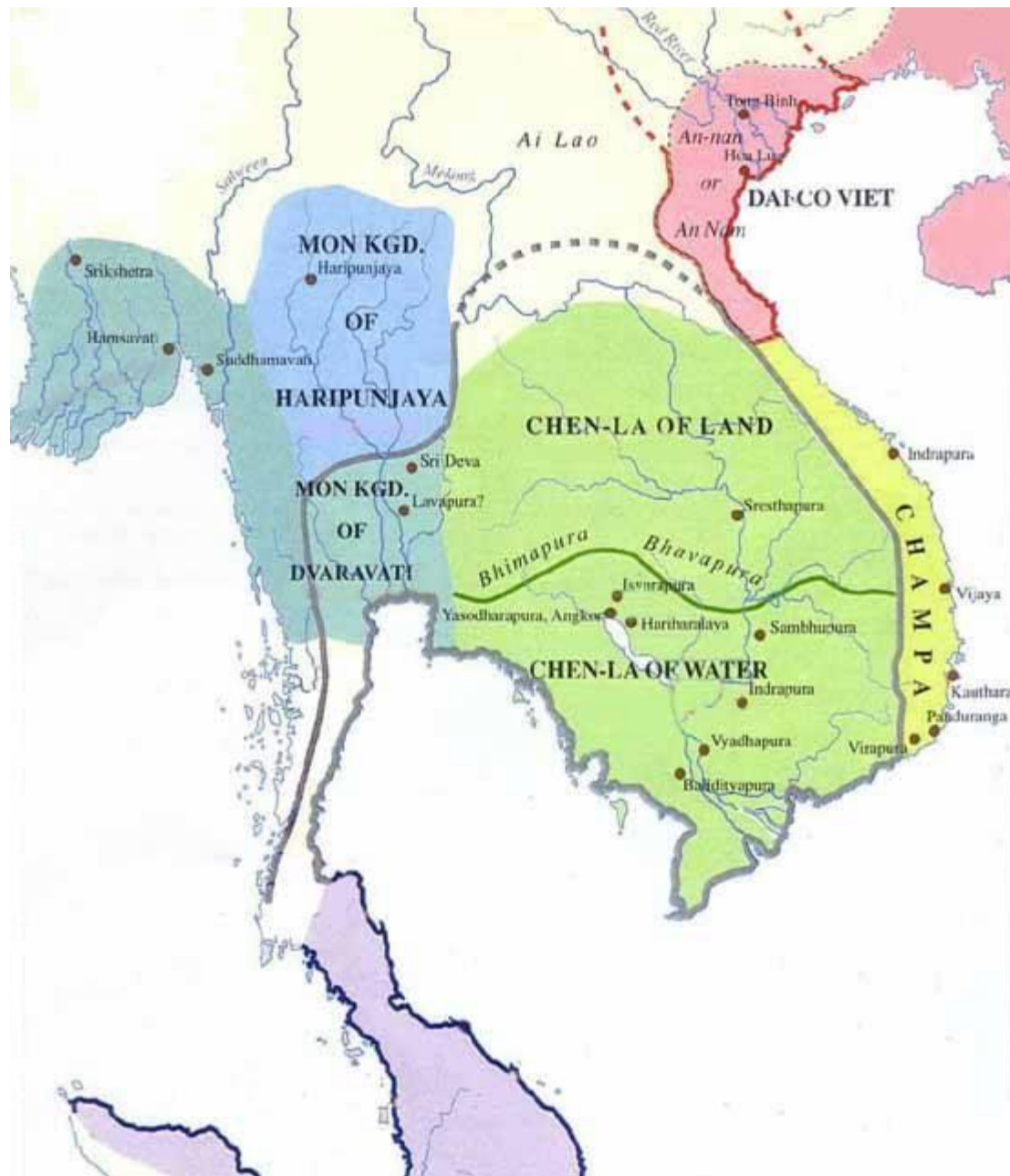


Photo 4a



Photo 4b



Photo 4c



Fig. 1



Photo 9

ឃុំ. ឆ្នាំង
ផ្លូវ. ស្ទឹងឆ្នាំង
តំបន់ 7200

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